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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

FEBRUARY
1993

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Paul J. McAuley
Brian Stableford
and others

Frederik Pohl
interview



68



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The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction by David Pringle (with assistance from Ken Brown). Hardcover edition, Grafton, 1990. A guide to some 3,000 sf titles described by the Oxford Times as "the four or five most useful books" sold in this field in the last two decades. It sold quite well and there are just a few copies left. We are selling these to IZ readers at less than half the original price of £16.95 - £8 inc. p & p (£10 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

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Interzone: The 2nd Anthology. Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others - fine tales which the Times described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to IZ readers at just over half the original cover price - £1.75 (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare. A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Covers all Ballard's work from "The Violent Noon" in 1951 up to the eve of publication of *The Unlimited Dream Company* in 1979. Still in print in the USA but long hard to obtain in Britain. Now copies are available from Interzone at £3.50 each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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Interaction

Dear Editors:

If the fiction you publish is anything to go by, I'd say that the gender agenda in sf is hotting up at the moment. Your writers have certainly noticed that heterosexuality is a problem, but I'm not convinced that stories about bonking with horses, salmon, anglerfish, seals (nasty, that) and sugar bowls are showing us the way forward.

The story I liked most of that lot was Ian Watson's "Swimming with the Salmon" in IZ 63. The male protagonist is seriously confused about quite a few things but at least his sense of wonder is still fully operational and Watson asks some interesting questions. I thought it was a very brave and intelligent story. Barrington Bayley's "Teatrav in the Sky" in IZ 64 does a real hatchet-job on patriarchy. I'm not sure if this was intentional or not but I don't much care - it's very funny and at least it's science fiction! I was looking forward to a new Diane Mapes but I was disappointed with "She-Devil" in the same issue. OK, women can be fiendishly ingenious in getting their own back at men but it makes for very depressing reading. And though Nicholas Royle's story "The Cast" provides conclusive proof that patriarchy is in crisis, please don't publish any more like this. I don't want Interzone full of boring horror stories.

While I'm on the subject of things I don't like, I'd better say that Storm Constantine's "Built on Blood" in IZ 64 was dull and ultimately pointless, but that I would rather you published a story by any woman, no matter how bad, than give space to something like "Ladies Night at the OK Corral." I found Charles Sheffield's story offensive, not because it's about cowboys bonking their horses, but because it's so damn coy about the subject and can't possibly be described as sf. And if that's what you call fantasy - this reader certainly doesn't want any more of it.

What I would like, of course, are loads of stories from Molly Brown and Greg Egan. They always write something different and it's all good. Fiction or non-fiction, if it's by Gwyneth Jones my heart beats a little faster so could we have her in every issue, please? A lot more fiction from new writers would also be welcome especially if it's anything like David Wishart's "Maud," definitely the best story I've read all year.

With one exception, your non-fiction is consistently good. It seems unfair to pick any names out because so many write so well, but Wendy Bradley, Mary Gentle and John Clute are especially wonderful. The exception is John Duffield. I like magazine

reviews but not if they're by him. Does he really think that your readers are a bunch of adolescent schoolboys? Because that's what he sounds like and who he seems to be writing for. "Ansible Link," by comparison, is much enjoyed!

It would be nice to see a good article on the gender politics of sf and fantasy. I can see why many of your authors go for the bonk-the-sugar-bowl option, so I'll write it for you if Mary Gentle won't...

Most of your readers want something to rub up their sense of wonder (me, too) and it's unfortunate that Interzone fails to deliver this so often. Maybe it would help if your writers identified patriarchy rather than heterosexuality as the source of their troubles. Quite a few women and men aren't prepared to give up on the other half of the human race - and hope frees the spirit, it really does. Finally, why on earth don't you publish some lesbian or gay sf? It exists!

Amelia Nitrate
Cambridge

Dear Editors:

I have been an enthusiastic Interzone reader for several years, and have always enjoyed and admired your stimulating and highly original magazine. Thus it was with keen disappointment and a sense of sickness that I read "Horse Meat" by Brian Aldiss, in IZ 65. It was well written and beautifully composed, as one would expect from such a talented writer, but that, for me, could not justify the pointless and horrific climax of the story.

Often, through the pages of IZ, the reader encounters violence and even an element of horror - none of this has ever offended me before. In "Horse Meat," however, the sickening events seem utterly without purpose. If the direction of the story is simply to show how brutal people can be, I have only to pick up a newspaper to see this all too clearly for myself. I certainly do not need florid, fictional accounts of executions, mutilation, and a horse rape, to make it more clear to me.

I am disappointed that a writer I have always admired should have written such a thing. I am equally disappointed that you published it. "Horse Meat" is one IZ story I wish I hadn't read.

Sarah Young
Bristol

Dear Editors:

Regarding issue 65 may I say one word: laughter.

First of all genuine, at the hydraulic stream of wit from Nick Lowe. How lucky we are to have this brilliant dissector of celluloid dreams. I turn to his

column first because it always puts me in an excellent mood.

The fiction comes next, and that by Newman and Byrne was superb - top-class writing, well-thought-out plot, full of ideas and humour, and Martin McKenna's illustrations caught the mood faultlessly. Sally Darnowsky's and Michael Cobley's stories were also good quality, but neither stretched or enlarged their respective sub-genres by much (bio-horror circa *The Brood* and Cyberpunk respectively). William Temple's effort seemed oddly unfinished, but I liked the tone and style.

I enjoyed Wendy Bradley's column, as I always do, she is consistently intelligent and amusing. David Langford is interesting, if a little garbled. The Margaret Atwood interview was OK, if a trifle dull - she is a professional Canadian and "slipstream" figure in the writing world, but she probably did this one with her eyes closed. The review pages are invaluable, your reviewers are reliable as well as fair in their comments.

Oh but. Oh dear. Brian Aldiss, and laughter of a different kind. Perhaps someone needs a short disquisition on the fine line between eroticism and pornography? But no, perhaps not. This is fantasy isn't it? Fantasy, unlike sci-fi and the rest of fiction, doesn't strictly have the duty to make us suspend our disbelief. Fantasy has its own logic and its own criteria - we don't have to believe it, we just have to be able to imagine it.

Well, I'm sorry but the words "Suck me off," in any context, but especially in a magazine noted for the quality of its fiction is redolent only of 12-year-old schoolboys sniggering behind the bike-sheds. I won't bore you with my objection to violent, sadistic sex in which the genitalia of a woman is rendered into a mass of blood and dribbling pus, but violent sex with a horse? Fortunately it defied my imagination - there simply is no way a horse could copulate with a woman who was tied to a bed; horses just aren't built that way!

Perhaps Brian would like details of my patented Virgin Immobilizer, which can be suspended from the ceiling with only a small extra outlay for the necessary brace, chains and cross-section beam - get at the poor cunt any old way you like then, Brian.

I'm not saying it shouldn't have been printed, I'm not in favour of any sort of censorship at all and I like a good laugh as much as the next woman, but I do wonder if it would have got through had it not had the name Brian Aldiss attached to it.

Eileen Shaw
Wakefield

Dear Editors:

I just had to write to say what a savage story Aldiss turned in (IZ 65). I cannot believe the genius of the man. While most authors turn senile and merely reiterate their tired old themes (e.g. *Number of the Beast*, *Umpteenth Foundation, 3001: Yet Another Space Odyssey*), Aldiss improves. I never thought he could! May his karma march ever on.

Newman & Byrne I am getting a bit tired of, but apart from that issue 65 was absolutely top hole. Congrats for bagging the Bill Temple story - I remember cutting my teeth on his "Martin Magnus" books and even then, at the tender age of 10 or 11 or so, noting how much superior they were to Heinlein.

Matt Quartermain
Reading, Berks.

Dear Editors:

"Horse Meat" is sure to stir things up. Bet you make the nationals and even get a mention in Parliament. If you do, might I predict what at least one of your new recruits will be like? I am, after all, a prophet.

From: Office of the Governor
Coney Weston Home for the
Criminally Insane

The following letter, addressed to you, was found in the cell of one of our inmates after his escape. In these egalitarian times I am unable simply to destroy it: if I were to, then his solicitor would be able to claim harassment. The original (written in green ink) is retained for forensic testing. Please find attached a copy.

DEAR ED
THAT STORY WHAT YOU HAD IN EDITION 65 WAS REAL GEAR. MY MATE WHAT GETS TO GO HOME SOME WEEK-ENDS LUCKY BASTARD BRINGS ME COPIES OF SLASH THE BITCH AND

SOMETIMES HE EVEN GET THAT GERMAN MAG CALLED CUT HER UP. THEY ARE REAL FAB BUT THIS TIME HE SAID THERES A PORNO RAID AND ALL HE COULD CUM UP WITH (GET IT EH?) WAS YOUR MAG. IMAGINE HOW I WAS REALLY PISSED OFF THEN I READ THE STORY CALL HORSE MEAT IT WAS JUST THE BISCUIT!!! NEXT TIME MAYBE YOU COULD GET HIM TO SLASH HER A BIT WHILE SHE'S BEING FUCKED BY THE HORSE BUT EXCEPT FOR THAT HE GOT IT ABOUT RIGHT FOR GUYS LIKE ME WHO KNOW THESE WHORES PANT FOR IT WHEN THEY IS BROKEN APART BY A REALLY BIG ONE. MORE OF THE SAME PLEASE.

I RECKON YOU IS PRETTY BRAVE. IT IS HARD TO PRINT ANYTHING GOOD NOWADAYS WITH ALL THESE GOODY GOODY'S AROUND I BET THEY MOAN ESPECIALLY THOSE WANKERX IN THE ARTS COUNCIL LET'S HOPE THEY DONT GET TO FIND OUT.

IF I MANAGE TO BREAK OUT SOME TIME I WILL VISIT YOU AND GIVE YOU MORE IDEAS FOR GREAT SNUFF PORN I AM A REAL EXPERT AND I KNOW A FELLOW AFFISHONADO WHEN I SEE ONE. HEY THIS ALDISS GUY MUST BE A REAL GROOVER GIVE US HIS ADDRESS AND I VISIT HIM TOO.
YOUR MATE SLASHER WILKINS
aka RAZORHEAD

Julian Flood
Coney Weston, Suffolk

Brian Aldiss replies to the above letters: It is not the business of sf, or of any self-respecting literary form, to delude its readers concerning the pain and suffering of the world. "Horse Meat" comments on what is happening now in Jugoslavia, Tajikistan, China and elsewhere: that if you treat people like animals they behave like animals. Lunn's sin is obvious; worse is the Obal family's, all of whom willingly sacrifice a daughter/sister for their own comfort.

Those unhappy with this theme should join Amnesty International,

Freepost, London EC1B 1HE. Amnesty's reports contain atrocities - alas - far worse than mine. Send £15.

Brian Aldiss
Oxford

Dear Editors:

I am a postgraduate student at University College London, currently writing a thesis on Philip K. Dick and William Gibson. I'm interested in the way that ordinary readers (as opposed to literary "experts") interpret sf, so I'm interviewing sf readers in London and Los Angeles. I would be extremely grateful if you could help me by printing some kind of appeal for interviewees in Interzone.

I would like to contact readers of Philip K. Dick and/or William Gibson to form several discussion groups; readers must live in the Greater London area, as the discussions will be held in central London. The group work will be conducted in the spring of 1993; each interviewee would participate in three sessions, spread over several weeks. Each session will last for about one and a half hours. The group discussions will be as informal as possible, and strictly confidential.

I would be very grateful for any assistance that you could provide. Please publish the address and phone number shown below, asking interested readers to send me their names and addresses. (Tel: 071-637 0540)

James Kneale
Dept of Geography
University College London
26 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AP

Note: This issue of IZ is four pages shorter than usual. This is because of a lack of advertising in the New Year period, and we hope to return to normal size next issue.

COMING NEXT MONTH IN INTERZONE

We have a moving fantasy set mainly in a war-torn Yugoslavia of the past. That's "Irene's Song," by new writer Astrid Julian. There will also be new stories by Garry Kilworth, Ian Lee and others, plus all our usual non-fiction features and reviews. So don't miss the March 1993 Interzone, on sale in February.



Dr. Euthere's

When Mike lost his appeal and had been sentenced and chipped, he had to get a job. That was the law in Holland, where most convicts weren't imprisoned but tagged with chip controllers and stripped of their entitlement to the universal unearned wage. After his personal counsellor explained about the monthly report Mike would have to make, and the penal chip's reflexive programming which would induce a minor epileptic fit if Mike ingested any alcohol or proscribed drug, or strayed outside Amsterdam city limits, or broke curfew, after all this, he told Mike that convicts were expected to make reparations to society.

"It is very simple, very straightforward. It is the Dutch way. What it is, you do society good and yourself good too."

This from a skinny 70-year-old geezer in baggy blue jeans, a fake Rolex, a wrinkled pop-art T-shirt, and a bowl-cut hair transplant. Mike was beginning to suspect that Holland's welfare system was run entirely by geezers and babushkas who'd grown bored with their statutory right of access to unlimited leisure. Up

there on the top floor of the Nieuwe Stadhuis, an old-fashioned open-plan office that was a maze of partitions and big glossy-leaved plants and cubicles like the veal-fattening pens in the prison camp farm, there wasn't one official younger than Mike's parents.

"What convicts need to learn," the counsellor said, swivelling back and forth in his chair, "is a sense of responsibility. A job will give you that. Do you have any preferences?"

Mike shrugged. His right eye was swollen shut from where they'd put in the chip, and although he'd been off Hux for three months now, he'd still felt as if he was trapped in some low-rez virtuality with Alice-in-Wonderland rules, where you were put in jail until you were proven guilty, whereupon you were released.

The first time he'd been sent down, in England, he'd done time in one of the huge prison camps. Greenham Common, a place that had once been some kind of military base. He'd been convicted for writing bogus prescriptions to support the habit he'd acquired working as an intern. Most interns prescribed them-

McAuley



Assistant

selves something to keep going through the 120-hours on-call shifts – those few who didn't cop a habit, drop out, go crazy or die from exhaustion just had to be androids – but Mike had been caught along with about 200 others in a media-inspired sweep and been handed ten years' hard labour, no remission. His medical degree had scored him a position in the camp's infirmary, but hard was just what it had been. And his wife had divorced him, taken off for the States with his baby son, and he'd acquired a serious dependency on Hux which after his release had had him running packages back and forth across the North Sea to support it, until one day a customs officer in Schiphol Airport took an interest in his overnight bag.

Hux was bad stuff, temporary infections of fembots which rejigged the sensory areas of the brain so that your whole nervous system became an erogenous zone, and the world was gently and irresistibly fucking you: you could come by stroking a piece of velvet, smelling the steam that lifted off fresh-boiled rice. But unlike most fembots, those self-organizing clades of machines smaller than bacteria that operated down

in the dance of molecules at the fermometre scale of thousand billionths of a millimetre, Hux had disabled self-replicating facilities and a life-span measured in minutes. Strictly speaking, pseudodrug fembots like Hux weren't addictive – they caused no permanent metabolic changes – but if you liked the trip you had to have a regular supply. Which was how Mike's habit had gotten him into the courier business, which was how he'd ended up under the chip.

When he said he didn't suppose he'd be allowed to work in a hospital, the counsellor agreed that it wasn't an option and paged through his terminal with maddening slowness until he came up with what he called an 80% match.

"Which is not so bad. The position's been open quite a while. It requires someone with medical qualifications."

"Don't I get a choice in this?"

"Of course," the counsellor said, suddenly not relaxed at all. "If you don't take what's offered, you can go to the general labour pool. However, I doubt you'd like that very much, because you would work

alongside dolls, heavy physical work. Just keep in mind that for troublemakers there's always the general labour pool. Do as you're told, and we will get along fine."

And that was how Mike found himself working for Dr Dieter Luther in one of Amsterdam's sex arcades.

I've just two requirements," Dr Luther told Mike on his first day at the sex arcade. "First, that you're not afraid of blood. Second, that you can fuck with the meat all you want, but only out of hours. Given your curfew, that will allow you only 20 minutes or so after we close, but needs must, eh, young man?"

"Whatever you say, Dr Luther," Mike said, giving his best shit-eating grin. Compared to the filth and cold and brutality of Greenham, working out his sentence in a sex arcade was a dream: all he had to do was feed the sex toys and clean their cubicles at the end of each night, and once in a while assist Dr Luther in his little sideline.

Dr Luther said, "You will remain my assistant only if you do whatever I say. That is the first and last rule, young man."

Dr Luther was a tall fastidious man of about 60, with silky white hair brushed straight back from his high, liver-spotted forehead. He had a dozen silk suits of different shimmering pastel colours, and smoked foul Bulgarian cigarettes using an ancient yellow ivory holder. He held the cigarette as if he was up to his neck in water, had a way of looking around with slow preening motion, and liked to think of himself as a privileged observer of human psychology.

"I am in a very distinctive position," he told Mike. "A sex arcade is the one place where true desire is made publicly manifest. It is the one place where honest sexual roles are played for real instead of inside the head. By honest, I mean those which are not compromised by the world, those which are true to the self's base desires. And here it is possible to gauge by sexual satisfaction the correlation between dream and actuality, between vision and performance. Sex is art, and the sex arcade is the possibility of Arcadia, of eternal return."

A lot of what Dr Luther said was simply for effect, Mike thought, like his cabinet full of medical oddities, and the shelf of brutal 20th-century pornography with titles like *Little Anal Annie* and *Piss Party*, stuff that had involved real live human women, not dolls. The customers went pathetically quiet if Dr Luther flashed them a page or two, as if granted a glimpse of the Arcadia he was always talking about.

"No imagination, Michael," Dr Luther would say afterwards. "They're born consumers, and can't think beyond what's put in front of them. Sheep to the slaughter, Michael, sheep to the slaughter."

There was always a creepy feeling in the arcade, as if Dr Luther's spirit had settled into every plush-carpeted corner, like a mist. Mike would be working away when he'd look up and see Dr Luther watching him, his cigarette holder held up by his neck. Sometimes he would make some remote, tangential remark, sometimes he would just watch while Mike creamed up one of the dolls, or sometimes he would describe in explicit detail what the doll was designed to do, how it performed, and then ask if it made Mike excited.

"Whatever you want," Mike took to saying after a while, but even that kind of harmless remark would make Dr Luther smile and he'd take out his notebook and gold pen and jot something down as if he was running an experiment with Mike as its subject. Soon, Mike was tempted to snatch notebook and pen and write down just what he thought of Dr Luther, but he restrained himself with the thought that no matter what, this had to be better than the general labour pool. The Dutch took drug-running a lot less seriously than the other European states. Mike only had to take three years of this, less with remission for good behaviour. He'd still be young enough to start over, start another life, maybe another family.

Sometimes Dr Luther would tell Mike to leave off what he was doing, they had work to do. Dr Luther had a few dozen customers with special needs that went beyond the normal parameters of the sex arcade. Mostly this involved modification of dead sex toys or worked-out straight dolls in the basement operating theatre. Delivery and disposal of what Dr Luther called his little custom jobs was arranged by a chic, hard-faced Frenchwoman who looked about 20 but was, Dr Luther said, at least 60.

What Mike did was hand the appropriate instruments and control bleeding with a diathermy pen while Dr Luther worked on the naked, nerve-blocked blue-skinned doll on a stainless steel table. The surface of the table was hatched with channels that drained blood into a plastic bucket under one corner, like a morgue slab. Dr Luther worked with quick, crude artistry, cutting new orifices and grafting pockets of mucosal epithelium and muscle to shape them, closing mostly with interrupted sutures using thick 20-day catgut because the clients liked the resulting Frankenstein effect. Mike didn't mind the butchery, and in a way it was interesting. Dr Luther was good, and sometimes held a running commentary on his procedures, as if Mike was his pupil rather than his assistant. They were at their most intimate, down there in the basement, over the sacrifice on the stainless steel table.

Sometimes Mike wondered if maybe Dr Luther didn't get off on cutting up dolls up for his special customers, not that he could ask. And besides, it wasn't even illegal. Dr Luther actually had a licence for his operations. It was on the wall of his little operating theatre, right next to the steel table. The clients were licensed, too, and what happened to the customized dolls wasn't much different to what happened to the live targets in the combat games arenas out at Rotterdam.

Dr Luther's sex arcade was in the basement and ground floor of a building with a high-peaked roof of red tile, in a cobbled side street that ran back from a narrow sleeve of water, Oude Zijds Voorburgwal, which marked where the old medieval walls had been. This was in the Red Light District, the *Wattejes*, right in the heart of the oldest part of Amsterdam. Dr Luther was an oddity in the sex-business community, which was mostly run by Africans or Caribbean islanders from the old Dutch colonies, but he was well-liked and greeted everywhere he went, even by the affable cops, greetings he acknowledged with a lift of his panama hat.

"You fuck around with Dr Luther, you get fucked over pretty good yourself," Wayne Patterson told Mike. "He's been around forever, guy, used to pimp real human girls when he was younger back in the last century, moved into dolls most before anyone else. He's even supposed to have run with the liberationists one time, turning dolls into fairies."

"You believe in fairies?" Mike had never before given much thought to dolls, which to him were just there, visible yet invisible, like computers or runabouts. Something about the blue skin made doll faces blurs unless you forced yourself to look closely, and then all you saw was the same broad flat unbridged nose, the same wide lipless mouth, the weak chin, the small round brown eyes. Dolls moved slowly and carefully, as if through hedges of invisible razors, pausing between stages of each task before moving to the next. Mike couldn't picture them running free in the wild places of Europe; they'd been changed too much to become animals again, to revert to their monkey ancestry.

"Most people don't, but I do. I saw one, one time, out on the fringe. It wasn't some doll that had wandered off with a bad chip," Wayne said, with a kind of reverence. "This was something else."

"I thought the peepers had rounded up all the liberationists." Mike remembered that a handful had ended up in Greenham a few months before he'd been discharged, but he hadn't had anything to do with them: they were politicals, the active edge of a movement that wanted to give dolls the same rights as humans."

"Maybe most of them, but not all. Word is Dr Luther does business with the liberationists, and the cops let him. What you have to understand about Dr Luther is that he's like the King, guy, you can't touch him."

Wayne Patterson was originally from London, a scrawny geezer who'd been living in Amsterdam for 20 years. He'd been under the chip for more than half that time, on and off, though he was clean right now.

He told Mike, "Dr Luther's had assistants before, not one came out the other side. Maybe they tried to rip him off. I learnt one thing under the chip, it's keep your nose clean. They stop you doing the one thing you were sent down for, that's all they're allowed to stop, but it's like you're visible, you try some scam and they got you back in to reprogram your chip before you get started."

Wayne Patterson worked as a tout for the live sex clubs, standing outside the doors and giving tourists the spiel, or handing out cards in the canalside cafés. One night he had tried to give one to Mike, who'd told him, hey, excuse me, I work here too, and Wayne had said yes, wait a minute, you're Dr Luther's new assistant, and had come around the ropes and bought Mike another espresso and soon enough gotten his story out of him and was giving him advice. Wayne Patterson grooved on telling zeks what to do, was Mike's opinion, although he had to admit the scrawny old bastard knew his way around.

"What you need to establish," he told Mike, "is a routine. See, you're in the slam right now, sitting here with me watching the girls go by. Some zeks can't cope with that, but you're intelligent, you'll catch on."

But routine was what Mike had in plenty. He had to spend 14 hours a day under curfew in the zek hostel,

mostly sleeping or zoning out in the tattered lounge, watching soaps or sport on the big ancient television with the few zeks who like him worked nightshift. It was a relief, not to have to think about what went on in the cubicles, the insertions, the laborious exertions, the exchange of fluids.

Working in the sex arcade was beginning to make him go a little crazy about sex, wanting it and not wanting it at the same time. His counsellor said that was good, it meant he was getting over his dependency on Hux, and when Mike said he preferred the low-rez haze of cold turkey, the counsellor had added that if he couldn't handle the temptation, he could always quit and go into the general labour pool, giving Mike a mean smile because he knew Mike wouldn't.

Mike kept telling himself it could be worse. In the little window between the end of his curfew and the start of work was the best time, when he hung out in one or another of the cafés in Nieuemarkt's big cobbled square, nursing an espresso, slapping at the mosquitoes that skated the night air under the strings of lights. Maybe Wayne Patterson would stop by, maybe not, but there was always a festive mood in early evening, with the lights and thumping music of the little funfair, and entire families of tourists gawking and giggling at the sampler holos hung out in front of the sex shows and arcades, and human prostitutes of all five sexes out looking for business. Parents out with their kids, a lot of the parents no older than Mike, which hurt to think about. His son would be, what, eleven? No, twelve. Twelve years old, and Mike didn't even know exactly where he was. Trying not to think about that was hard.

Still, sometimes a particularly outrageously sexy girl walking by would get right to him. Mike couldn't help it. He was still young, just past 30, and sex with a live human girl didn't seem at all possible. He couldn't afford the prostitutes, had nowhere but the zek hostel to take any girl he picked up. His lust felt raw and unclean after Hux's pure intensity, but now it was all that he had.

He would watch the girl go by in the soft evening light, maybe in a white T-shirt cut to show the sides of her breasts, and pearl-shimmer short-shorts cut just above the curve of her ass, her long legs gleaming, and he'd say, sort of wincing, "Oh man, that sort of thing ought to be made illegal."

"That's absolutely the wrong response," Wayne Patterson said. "If you like her so much, you should ask her to sit with you, have a drink. Nice young fellow like you."

"Yeah, and in five minutes she'd know I was a zek."

"Plenty of women go for zeks, believe me," Wayne Patterson said, although the one he introduced to Mike was a raddled ex-whore weighing about 100 kilos, most of it spilling out of her tight red dress, who was savvy enough to see Mike's alarm and sweet enough not to comment on it until Wayne Patterson had gone off to take a leak, when she told Mike that Wayne was a good fellow who mostly meant well and besides, she understood that Mike worked for Dr Luther, so he must be coping freebies.

"Well, not exactly," Mike said.

Mike didn't mind handling the sex toys, but they didn't once give him a hard-on. They lay supine and uncomplaining in their two-by-two-metre cubicles on

plastic-covered thick foam mattresses, blue skin black in the dull red lights, more pathetically ludicrous than arousing. They were like those breeds of dog so selected for one characteristic that they can hardly function at all. A couple had breasts so big they could hardly sit up to use their bedpans; others had huge over-complicated labia like sea anemones or insectivorous tropical blooms, which needed special creams to stop them getting infected with yeasts, or internal arrangements so strange Mike would rather put his dick in a meat grinder.

As far as Mike was concerned, dolls were just things, less than animals because they had been designed. He lusted hopelessly after the girly-girl whores that paraded the cobbled streets of the Wallerjes, but he'd as soon screw a vacuum cleaner as a doll.

And then he fell in love.

The sex arcade had closed and Mike had finished hosing down the cubicles and feeding the sex toys their syrup when he found Dr Luther waiting for him by the service door, slowly and voluptuously smoking a cigarette, a little black bag at his feet.

"I have a little business meeting tonight," he said. "You'll come along, Michael. Hold still, now."

Mike jerked back, because Dr Luther had waved something towards his face. Dr Luther gripped Mike's chin, showed him what looked like a pocket torch. He held it up to Mike's right eye and there was a brief flash.

"All done," Dr Luther said, releasing Mike.

"What was that?"

"I reprogrammed your chip for tonight. Extended your curfew."

"That's not legal, is it?"

"It is not legal, but I am sure you will not mind."

"You want me to break the law, and I don't know what for?"

"I am the law, Michael, as far as you are concerned. Come now. We have a rendezvous."

They rode the trams out to a service station at a road junction near Schiphol airport. At two in the morning it was surprisingly busy: long-distance lorry drivers made noise at the bar; ordinary families ate in groups, eyes on the flickering teevee screens; a minor rock group Mike recognized from his trawling of daytime television made a lot of noise at the bar with their road crew and hangers-on. Dr Luther watched all this benevolently, as if he had created the whole scene for Mike's edification.

Mike was sort of scrunched up in one corner of the booth. His eyes were hurting. This was too like the times he had picked up his packages when he had been in the courier business. Pressure was swelling in his right eyesocket, not quite sharpening to pain.

Dr Luther nudged him and said, "See the fellow who looks like an undertaker, buying a cup of coffee? He'll go outside, and one minute later we'll follow him."

Mike looked just as the guy turned from the counter. A swarthy square face framed by a helmet of black hair, a cheap black suit and big shiny black shoes, a bootlace tie at the collar of his white shirt. He saw Mike looking at him and turned away, headed for the door.

Mike said, "Is this worth your while? I can't see that you'd make much from people like that. Whatever it is you're selling."

Dr Luther pulled out a pocket watch and flipped up its lid. "Money isn't the issue," he said. "What we are dealing with here are liberationists. They want the thyrotropic hormone that I use to bring the sex toys to rapid maturity. It's part of the process of making fairies, Michael."

Mike supposed that he was to say something, but he didn't know what to think about it at all, except that maybe Wayne Patterson hadn't been retailing as much shit as he had thought.

He drank down the last of his herbal tea and followed Dr Luther out into the hot windy night. The sharp sweet stink of gasohol. The distant roar of the motorway, which made a ribbon of orange light beyond a screen of trees. They went around the side of the service station. The kitchen door was propped open, and inside, in bright light glancing off white porcelain and stainless steel, dolls in white paper overalls worked at a rapid pace amongst the deep-fryers and griddles, bald blue heads gleaming in the harsh light.

The liberationists were waiting in the shadows by the kitchen dumpbins. There were three of them, the swarthy man who'd come into the service station, another man who looked enough like the first to be his brother, and an older woman in a ragged denim dress, her grey hair in dreadlocks. Dr Luther murmured to Mike that since the big crackdown last year, the liberationists were living wild with their creations, and that it wouldn't do to mention it.

The woman, who was clearly in charge, looked at Mike and said, "Who's the guy?" She was about 60, with a round face and a head that seemed slightly too small for her fleshy body. Mike looked away from her direct gaze.

"My assistant," Dr Luther said.

"A zek? Gee, Dieter, maybe we ought to do the deal another time."

"He's fine. You are fine, aren't you, Michael?"

"Sure," Mike said.

One of the men in black laughed. Behind them, in the dumpbin, something rustled through the waste food: rats, Mike thought, suddenly nervous. During his time at Greenham he had come to loathe rats.

"He's under a chip," the woman said, "we can give him something to get him happy that it won't register."

Dr Luther said, "Are you offering to sell after all this time? I am surprised."

"I'm offering him a freebie, Dieter. It isn't for sale. It isn't mine to sell."

"And yet you can give it away. Well, do a deal with him if you like, but on his own time. Meanwhile, you have to pay for the hormone."

"Pretty soon we'll be able to make that ourselves, too," the woman said.

"Of course, it is not difficult. But do you have the equipment to refine it? I would advise you not to try using it otherwise; it will have unpleasant side effects on your patients." Dr Luther added, "You know, it is possible that we can trade..."

"Maybe I can give you a freebie, too. Turn you on, Dieter. Do you some good."

The woman was being playful, Mike saw. This was a routine she and Dr Luther had gone through many times.

"Come on," one of the men said, the one who'd come into the service station. "We get this done. We go." He had some kind of Balkan accent.

"I have thirty millilitres at 2000 units per," Dr Luther said, holding up a sealed silvery plastic baggie. "I think you know the price."

"As we agreed," the woman said, and held up a sheaf of crumpled US dollars, green bills worn threadbare by their long use as the currency of the grey market.

Mike had been watching the exchange, and didn't notice the figure rising from the dumpbin until it vaulted to the ground and looked straight at him. A blue-skinned high-cheeked elfin face, eyes flooded with amber reflections from the kitchen's light. Beautiful, in a ragged lace dress that half-concealed, half-revealed her slim body. A changeling, a fairy.

The kitchen door clattered open, and a doll limped out, shouldering a greasy bag of waste food. Mike looked around for a moment; when he looked back, the fairy had gone.

The two men had stepped backwards into the shadows, vanishing in the same way the fairy had. The woman looked at Mike and said, "Hey, now you know why we do this. You come by some time, you can turn on like they do. Really, our stuff will get by your chip."

Mike said, "Oh yeah? What does it do?" He was acutely aware that Dr Luther was watching him.

"It'll take you on a one-way trip to fairyland, young fellow. What do you say?"

"My assistant stays clean," Dr Luther said. "If I get into trouble with the authorities, I can't answer for the consequences."

"I think your assistant's in love," the woman said, and then she turned and walked off into the darkness beyond the light that fell from the kitchen.

Dr Luther said, "You do not entertain that idea, Michael. With me you stay clean."

"Listen, I only work for you. I'm not like one of your dolls."

"Of course not. You don't want to be owned by anyone. That is quite natural. But you are mine, Michael, while you are chipped. I give back your proof of employment, your werkgeversverklaring, you go to the general labour pool. Like this poor thing here."

The doll had halted outside the kitchen door, stupidly confused by the presence of humans where no humans should be. Dr Luther caught its chin in one hand and the sack of garbage it was carrying dropped with a ripe splatter. He raised his other hand and the scalpel caught the light from the kitchen. Then he cut the doll's throat.

It stood with blood gushing dark red down the front of its paper coveralls, then collapsed face forward into the spill of chicken bones and plastic and rotten lettuce leaves and soggy half-eaten rolls.

Mike stepped back as blood pooled towards his boots. He was too shocked to speak.

"Remember that the fairies are just one step from this," Dr Luther said. He kicked the dead doll's head. "Let me tell you about dolls. They were originally gene-spliced in South Korea as a way of trying to out-



compete its neighbours of the Pacific Rim, and soon every nation was using them as cheap slave labour. Kobolds, they were originally called, although no one but the Peace Police uses this term now. The liberationists cure the dolls by taking out their control chips and inserting new ones, and infect them with fembots which hardwire the chips into the dolls' cerebral cortex, then bring them to sexual maturity. Most dolls are male, did you know that?"

"Does it matter?" The talk of chips had reminded Mike of his own; his right eye itched from the inside.

"Not usually, of course. There's nothing magical about them, and nothing there for you, my dear Michael. I've been offering to distribute that drug for several years, but always I am refused."

"She said it wasn't hers to sell."

"She helped make the fairies, Michael. What do you think?"

Mike thought about that on the ride back, and on and off all the next day, speculation mixed with the glimpse he'd had of the fairy's fine-boned face, its wild fearless gaze.

"I heard talk of a place out there where it doesn't matter you're chipped," Wayne Patterson volunteered the next evening, in the café where Mike was whiling away the time before the sex arcade opened. He explained in his dogged old man's way, "The thing is, they say you can find anything out on the fringe, but when you're out there... You're there, that's all that matters on the fringe. You can't fall any further. Nothing at all to do with fairies."

"You said you saw a fairy?"

"The peepers killed most of them when they broke up the liberationists," Wayne said. "Maybe there are one or two left, but that's it. It's more important they're fringers than fairies."

Mike said, "Right now I've something more interesting to think about. Last night, I learnt there are still liberationists."

He explained what had gone down, and Wayne grew serious. "I tell you one thing, Mike. Don't fuck with Dr Luther. He's been around a long time. He's got all sorts of connections and immunities."

"That drug turns out to be real, there are maybe what? A million zeks, two million? Most of them wanting to be turned on. And then there are the straights."

Wayne said, "You used to be on Hux, right? Bad stuff, Mike. I think you want a taste again. I seen this before. Go talk to your therapist, he'll tell you."

"What I was into... I don't need a replacement for that. What I need is to get out from under the chip, away from Dr Luther and his little tricks. And I know that costs money. There are places that'll take it out easy enough, but then I need a new identity, don't want to look at tripling my sentence if I get caught. And you, Wayne, what about you?"

"What about me?" Wayne said, looking confused.

"You got to get yourself out, too. You're stuck here and you deserve better. Name a place you want to go, you can get there." He could see the idea growing in Wayne by the way the old man's eyes started to lose focus. He said, "All I need is someone who knows the fringes, someone who can find out where the liberationists are hiding."

"Those guys you were talking about," Wayne said. "They sound an awful lot like some ghosts I was staying with some time. You know, stateless people. These were from I think Albania."

Mike smiled. "I believe it's my round," he said. "What do you want, coffee or juice?"

Later, at work, Dr Luther made no mention of the last night, for which Mike was very grateful. He wasn't sure if he could hold his tongue if Dr Luther made one of his remarks. He prepped a doll for surgery, washing its stringy blue body with alcohol, giving it a shot to put it under with the pneumatic hypodermic. Dr Luther worked quickly, building a muscular orifice in the doll's abdominal wall: this was for the special customer who took to heart the old maxim about understanding death by fucking life in the gall bladder.

"You'll help with the delivery tonight," Dr Luther said, after they had rolled the doll onto the gurney and Mike was sluicing blood from the stainless steel table. Dr Luther snapped off his gloves and dropped them into the bucket of clotting blood. "Just look tough and say nothing. That's all Eve wants. You mess up, she'll tell me, but I trust you not to mess up, Michael. And don't bother coming back when you're done. This is an expensive rush job, no need to open the arcade tonight."

"I'll do my best," Mike said, nice as pie, thinking that if Dr Luther wanted him out of the way that night there were more subtle ways to go about it. Arrogance was as bad a vice as stupidity.

The delivery was in the smart neighbourhood to the west of the Damrak, on Prinsengracht canal, a stone's throw from the Anne Frank House. Eve, the hard-faced Frenchwoman, didn't lift a finger as Mike manoeuvred the groggy doll out of the water taxi and across the cobbled street into the elevator of the tall narrow apartment building.

The special client lived in the penthouse. It was done out in retrochic: a gleaming hardwood floor; glass walls on three sides of the living room looking out across the lights of the city; leather and chrome furniture spotlit like museum pieces, which was probably what they were. An actual human butler, whom Mike at first mistook for the client, a small grave Thai in a loose black smock, helped instal the doll in a ceramic and stainless steel bathroom while Eve waited by the door. The butler handed her a fat envelope which she put in her Chanel bag.

On the way down, Mike said, "What happens to it?"

Eve gave him a hard look and said, "They do things to it, maybe fuck it, maybe not, and then kill it, slowly."

"Not my idea of sex."

"You don't have much imagination, do you, Michael? That's good. Don't ask questions, and you'll be all right."

Outside she handed him a bill before she stepped into the waiting water taxi. Ten ecus.

He stood at the edge of the quay and said, "What do I do, buy a cup of coffee?"

In the water taxi, Eve looked up. "Isn't it almost your curfew? You go home now, stay cool."

But going home was the last thing on Mike's mind; instead, he walked back to Dr Luther's sex arcade. It

was shut, its frontage dark amongst the neon hustle and bustle of midnight. A black, official-looking limo was illegally parked on the corner under the big Pepsi-Cola hologram, its human driver reading by the hologram's red, white and blue light, oblivious to the colourful crowds that swirled around him while he waited for his boss to finish with his cheap thrill. In the Neumarkt Square beyond, the lights of the funfair's big wheel slowly revolved against the purple night.

Mike got in at the back door at the bottom of a set of narrow slippery steps, using the key he'd taken on the way out: He was looking through the steel pharmacy cabinet in the basement when he heard footsteps above and then muffled voices.

Each of the cubicles had an intercom set. In the old days the girls would have used them in case the customer got rough; now they were marked for customer convenience. Mike switched them on, one by one, his heart tripping at each click, until he heard Dr Luther telling someone that it was risky, they probably wouldn't even come, with an edge to his voice Mike had never heard before.

A man's voice, heavy and slow, fluent Dutch coloured by an unidentifiable accent, said, "That's your problem. I trust for your own sake you'll find a way."

"I could tell them that the batch was contaminated. It would work as long as they haven't started to use it."

"I don't want details, Luther. Just that it's arranged."

"Well, as long as I'm not involved beyond that."

"We arrest them, leave you. My word."

"I'm losing a source of income, you know."

"Hardly a major worry for you, given your special clients. You know we can make it up to you. Tomorrow night."

Mike didn't need to hear any more. He shut off the intercom, and went through the pharmacy cabinet, then the surgical kit. That was where he found the reprogramming device. It was a slim black tube with a gridded lens at its flared end, a digital input pad and a red button set in its shaft. He prayed that the thing wasn't date specific, that what had worked yesterday would work today, and put it to his right eye and pressed the button. Then he pulled open the refrigerator and grabbed a couple of sealed bags of thyrotropic hormone, and went out the way he'd come in.

On the hot, crowded, neon-lit street, he saw the limo pull away, moving slowly over the cobbles. A moment later, Dr Luther appeared at the door of the arcade. He carefully locked it, and went off in the opposite direction. Mike ran all the way to the club where Wayne Patterson was working.

At that time of night, the trams were mostly empty. Wayne Patterson sat on one side of the aisle, Mike on the other. Mike felt a buzzing excitement, couldn't stop telling the old man what he'd heard, although all Wayne would say was that of course Dr Luther was a snitch, just about everyone on the Walletjes was, it was how they got through life, it didn't mean anything.

"But it does!" Mike said passionately. He was thinking of that sweet glimpse, the beautiful creature. He could have reached out... He remembered that Wayne Patterson had once told him about the time he'd

worked in a termination plant. They strapped the dolls in bucket seats on a kind of chain, shot them in the head with a captive bolt, and the seats carried them into the incinerator. Inspectors were supposed to make sure every doll was dead before it burned, but Wayne had said maybe one in a hundred woke up with a broken skull, started to scream and struggle, and the inspectors knew all about it, because why else would the dolls have to be strapped in...

It was still hot when they reached the service station at the motorway intersection, the night air close and absolutely still. Traffic made a rushing noise beyond the screen of trees. Lights twinkled out in the heath, little fires. Wayne Patterson shivered, said it was so spookily the same.

"Then you can find them."

"Look, Mike, they've a mind to it they can find you. But they don't want to—"

"The liberationists can't be that far away. Luther expects to meet up with them tomorrow. And they said they'd look out for me. They want to turn me on."

"And you're going to let them."

"Sure. I have to try the goods first, don't I?"

"The goods. Right. But that's not really why you're doing this, is it?" When Mike didn't answer, Wayne sighed and said, "Might as well get it over. Stay close to me, kid. Don't go running off no matter what you see."

A hundred metres beyond the neon orange glow of the parking lot, it was almost pitch black. The stars were bright, but there was no moon. The two men kept tripping on heather roots exposed in the sandy soil. Once, Wayne made Mike stand still for a whole minute because of shadows on a low ridge ahead, until he suddenly snorted and said, "It's okay, I think they're just bushes."

They were: dwarf willows, with an old torn sleeping bag bunched up in their shelter. "Someone was here," Wayne Patterson remarked, and Mike laughed, something relaxing in him, and told Wayne he was a dead loss as an Indian scout.

"Hold up," Wayne said. "I think I hear someone coming."

That was when they were rushed. There were two packs, coming from right and left, throwing plastic sheets over both men, knocking them down by press of numbers. Mike felt hard little fingers clutching at the baggies of hormone solution, and tried to hug them to his chest, but something bit his wrist and he howled and let go, kicking against the weights on his legs, which suddenly vanished. He sat up, convulsively threw away the plastic sheeting, called out Wayne's name.

Silence.

Mike reached out, walking his fingertips centimetre by centimetre across sandy soil until they encountered Wayne Patterson's nylon windbreaker. The old man didn't move; there was no pulse in his throat. Mike straddled him and started heart massage and mouth-to-mouth, but Wayne didn't respond and then Mike found the thin spike that had been driven into his right eye and with a sudden convulsive movement flung himself away from the corpse.

That was when he heard the music.

It came from the north, deeper in the wasteland. A faint glow showed there and Mike walked towards it,

stumbling over tussocky grasses in near darkness. It was past two o'clock in the morning, and his right eye throbbed. Reprogramming had only increased the limit that the chip allowed by a few kilometres, and he cloudily wondered how much time he had before the extension on his curfew ran out.

The light came from a fire which burned in a little steep-sided hollow. There were two huts built right into the sides of the hollow like entrances to mine shafts, their walls made of crates with product names still stencilled on their sides, their steep roofs of overlapping flattened tins. A wailing music rose up from somewhere near the fire. It was a wild skirl of women's voices, a dissonant chorus that sent chills snarling at the base of Mike's spine. He'd never heard music like it.

As Mike went down the slope, his right eye suddenly swarmed with black chevrons - a warning that he'd reached his limit. He clapped his hands over his eyes and cried out, and tripped and fell, rolling down the sandy slope and coming to rest at the feet of the men who'd come around the fire to meet him.

They helped Mike up. He had to squint around the chevrons to see them. They were dressed in shabby black suits, or long dark coats over jeans and ragged pullovers. With black curly hair and a gypsy look, they all looked a little like each other, as if they were all brothers or uncles in the same family, the same family indeed as the men who had escorted the woman liberationist. They spoke what sounded like Italian, slow enough that Mike could almost understand it. One of them held up a bulky old-fashioned radio with a grey plastic grill front and twisted a dial, and the music stopped.

Mike had fallen into the middle of a gang of ghosts, part of the population of second- or third-generation refugees from the central European wars or from further still, old-style Russians who'd fled the Islamic Jihad, and Africans who'd migrated like so many birds up Italy into Europe's heartland. There were millions of them living in the wild places outside the cities and arcologies, enduring the hot summers and cold winters, the ice storms and droughts caused by the great climatic overturn. They had no money but used an elaborate system of barter; no government but that of the family or group; no law but that which the EC refugee commission imposed upon them. They took medical care from U.N. clinics, work and food where they could.

One of the men, a tall broad fellow perhaps a few years younger than Mike, said in broken French that he and his brothers were from Albania, that he would be honoured if Mike would break bread here with them while they waited for his friend, and Mike, misunderstanding, told him about Wayne, the way he had been killed.

The man said he understood, that they could do something for this Wayne if perhaps Mike had some money...?

Mike discovered that the slender roll of notes he'd stashed in the key pocket of his jeans was gone; all he could offer were a few coins, sliver-thin ecus and a heavy English five pound coin with milled edges. Poor enough fare for the ferryman, but the tall man jingled them in his palm, then clapped Mike on the back.

Somewhere on the other side of the fire, the radio started up with the women's chanting voices again. An unlabelled green bottle with a chipped neck was passing from hand to hand. A moment later, just as Mike was trying to explain that he couldn't drink brandy, the woman liberationist stepped out of one of the huts.

“Quite a sight you made," she said, "stumbling this way and that across the heath, like King Lear with his fool, looking for Cordelia."

Her grey dreadlocks were flattened to one side, as if she'd been sleeping, and her skin gleamed with sweat; her cotton dress, printed with a Martian scape of sand and pitted rocks, clung to the upper slopes of her loose breasts. She looked drunk, or stoned.

"Were those really children?"

"Of course they were. Fairies don't need money."

Mike wondered how she knew the kids had stolen his bankroll. He said, "I was bringing you some thyrotropic hormone. They got that when they killed my friend."

"Oh, and are you sure that's what he was?" The way she said it, Mike knew what she'd done. She added, all concern, "Is there something wrong with your eye?"

"I'm out here at my limit. I can't go any further. That hormone was all I had. And the money. Except I can tell you something..."

One of the Albanians handed the woman the bottle of brandy. She swigged deeply, wiped her mouth. "You came to see the fairies. If you still want that, you'll have to take this in your mouth. Hurry. We don't have much time."

She thrust out her hand, palm-up: a leech-like gob of live jelly curled and uncurled there. Mike stepped back, and she laughed.

"No one said it would be easy!" Then her face was in his, brandy fumes so strong it was a wonder his chip wasn't triggered. "I can show you such wonders. Do you have the courage?"

"Why I came out here..." But he couldn't explain. He had no plan, only desire, sudden and physical as hunger. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I will. Yes."

Then her hand was over his mouth, and he could feel the thing against his lips. "Don't swallow," she said. "Don't chew. Just let it in."

Mike opened his mouth with an act of will, felt the thing squirm onto his tongue. He gagged, but it had already sunk into his mucosal membranes. A slow throbbing spread out from the soft tissue at the muscular root of his tongue, filling the cave of his mouth. A wave of nausea rolled over him and he doubled over and vomited.

The woman held his hair back as his stomach wetly clenched, forcing up chyme thin as egg white. When he was able to stand, she said, "Now you're almost ready."

Mike started to ask what she'd done to him, but suddenly there was a great beating of wings and light stabbed down, flooding the little hollow. Moments later a helicopter descended from the darkness beyond the glare, blowing out the fire and sending ashes flying up. An amplified voice said something that was lost in the helicopter's roar.

The Albanians were disappearing into one of the huts. The woman grabbed Mike's hand and dragged him into the other. "Crawl," she said, and pushed him into the dark at the back, which turned out to be an old drainage pipe.

Mike crawled, following the sounds of the woman as she turned left at a Y-junction. Warning chevrons floated before him; his right eye felt as if it was filled with mercury.

Maybe ten, maybe twenty minutes of this. At some point the chevrons faded from Mike's sight: the woman was leading him back towards Amsterdam. Mike began to appreciate how the dolls moved around. There had been kilometres and kilometres of pipes installed at the beginning of the century to drain saltwater seepage, part of the now-abandoned reclamation schemes

The pain in his eye and the chevrons came back: he felt a sudden breeze. The woman pulled him up. They were in an inspection manhole. Mike could hardly see now. He said, "I can't go any further," but the woman only said she'd see about that and started climbing. Mike followed, hand over hand up the iron staples that made a ladder up the manhole. Hot hands grasped his, pulled him up, and something, a fairy, grinned into his face. With the chevrons swarming in his sight Mike couldn't tell whether it was the one he'd seen before. It kissed him full on the mouth, and he felt the hot worm of its tongue writhe across his teeth.

The creature giggled and then it was running into the darkness towards tangles of pipes and block-houses, an abandoned chemical plant or pumping station lightless except for a single warning light flashing red on top of a tall chimney.

As Mike started after the fairy, the structure seemed to flow into itself, growing taller, turrets reaching up against a sky softly luminous and dusted with living stars as a meadow is dusted with daisies. A woman took his hand; she was tall and fair, dressed in a loose gown that swept to her feet, with a coronet thrust carelessly in her long loose hair. Her laughter was like a bell; her soft hand thrilled in Mike's own, and he turned and pulled her to him and kissed her until she pulled away, laughing again. "You have to save yourself," she said, and led him on until black light filled his eyes and spiralled into his head and took him away.

Mike came awake all at once, sweat starting from every pore. His right eye hurt like crazy, tender as when he'd been chipped. He was lying in a nest of greasy, smelly rags, head-first inside a dead-end pipe just long enough to hold him. Light flickered beyond his feet; there was the sound of people moving around. He turned himself around, pain flaring in his eye with every movement. When he stuck his head out to take a look where he was, the same fairy he'd seen that one time at the service station smiled at him from about a metre away and he remembered and managed not to scream.

He was in some kind of vault, big as a church, lit by vague shafts of light that fell through grids high above. A double row of steel girders held up a ceiling of concrete slabs. They stood either side of a central channel that was filled with black water in which



grossly fat dolls wallowed on their backs like beached walruses. Naked blue-skinned fairies moved amongst the girders, going to and fro, weaving in and out, forming groups of six or eight or ten that slowly collapsed against each other, writhing and crawling and licking and stroking in languorous slow motion before flowing away in different directions.

It made Mike think of the ant heaps under the flagstones of the path of his parents' house. When he'd been little he'd lever up the slabs to watch with a mixture of curiosity and revulsion the swarming secret life. He'd forgotten that emotion until now.

Every so often a fairy would step up and bend to kiss the bloated blue-skinned belly of one of the dolls that wallowed in the trough of black water – no, they were sucking at tubes which jutted from crusted ligatures and dribbled clear pink goo. Mike saw the woman, hands cupped on the shiny swollen belly of one of the dolls, cheeks hollowing as she sucked. She straightened, slowly licked her lips, then dreamily stalked up the slope. Mike hastily slid out of his hole, falling to his knees on wet gritty concrete.

The woman crouched beside him. Stuff like egg albumin glistened on her chin. "Welcome to fairy-land," she said. "I can tell you're not seeing it as it is."

"Oh, I am. I am. Jesus, you live like this?"

"Once we thought only of freeing them," the woman said dreamily. "We unchained their minds, sharpened their intelligence, induced sexual maturation. We liberated them. We believed they should decide their own destiny, but we didn't realize that we weren't making them more human, but less. Did you ever read science fiction?"

"Not really." Mike found all those old movies that showed up on cable kind of disturbing, full of the violent aspirations of a bad century. They put odd thoughts in his head, fantasies of instant gratification, limitless power. Stuff like that could mess up your life, he should know.

"They always thought the aliens would come from the stars. But they're here, Mike. We made them. When the peace police came down, some of us escaped. We ran into the wilderness. The fairies found us, took us in. We'd changed them and they started to change us." She giggled. "Here we are. Isn't it wonderful?"

Mike said, "Dr Luther wants to turn you in. You go to him again, he will."

"Dr Luther told the peepers you'd lead them to us. He thinks that he can get the drug for free if he can find out where we live. There's a recording circuit in your chip. So we took it out."

"I knew it! You're crazy!"

Mike felt a wave of panicky despair. He really didn't need this. His flaky old counsellor had been clear about that one point: trying to interfere with your chip automatically tripled your sentence. He'd be an old man before he came out from under, childless, unloved. He'd be like poor dead Wayne Patterson.

He said, without hope, "Take me back."

"Mike, Mike. Don't you understand? You have so much to give. You have what they need, what they want. They're only the third stage. We were the first, the dolls the second, fairies the third. You can contribute to what the fairies need for the fourth, for the fusion. Certain genes... Fairies, males and females

both, are sterile, but still they are making a new generation. They learn so quickly. They strip bowel epithelial cells to the haploid state and fuse them, gestate the embryos in the abdominal cavities of males when they run short of females.

"They need you, Mike. They need what you have to add to what they have already taken, as much variety as possible, yes. Don't think you're the first or the last. And you'll be rewarded. You came here for the drug, but you can't use the drug without the catalyst. That's what I made you put under your tongue. It's part of you now, has sunk its pseudoneurones into your limbic cortex. When it receives the blessing, then you'll see all this as it really is!"

Mike said, "Blessing?"

The fairy's hot fingers feathered Mike's cheek. He didn't know if he was going to throw up or come. Its beautiful knife-blade face was centimetres from his. Its eyes were flecked with gold, and he could see his own face, unshaven and ripely bruised around the right eye, reflected there. Its lips branded his own, and he felt its hot tongue slide into his mouth, sweet and hot and wet.

And he saw.

The fairy and the woman took him by the hands and he rose and walked down the broad-sweep of soft living marble. The woman swung a little sack of soft leather, threw a pinch of gold dust from it into the air, then tied it around Mike's neck, telling him it was his price, his reward.

He hardly noticed, seeing the filigreed pillars that arched gracefully to the mother-of-pearl roof of this sumptuous chamber, hearing the siren song of the silken-skinned creatures that bathed in the silver waters of the central pool, joyously and generously offering their sweet intoxicating milk to any who craved it. He saw the lambent joy in the fairies that surrounded him, their touches waking waves of pleasure that pierced him to his core as they divested him of his clothes and pressed against him, moving together on and over and under, and Mike was taken in and he accepted and became a part of the flowing movement. Skin on skin, hotter than human. The arching press of strange, boned penises, not seeking to enter him but only flowing, tracing exquisite patterns across his skin. The woman's laughter floating somewhere, tiny bells that tripped the mechanisms of his heart. It was better than Hux, it took him all, skin and muscle, nerve and bone and blood and brain. Someone fed him clear pink milk from their mouth, and it was an explosion of delight running through his core, rising and rising, the fairies intent around him now, still moving on him as he came in wave after wave, his come arching gloriously, caught in a crystal bottle by an intent fairy, sperm flickering like stars, like phosphorescent fish schooling in a coral grotto as Mike screamed with pleasure, and fainted.

Night, warm wind stinking of halogens blowing across the coarse grass in which Mike lay. There was a plastic bag in his hand – he remembered that it had been a leather sack chock full of gold dust, but it held only a dredging of coarse sand – and then he remembered everything else, and laughed.

From a little way off, Dr. Luther said, "Well you're awake, even if you haven't come to your senses."

"Oh Christ."

Dr Luther came forward and helped Mike sit up. Amsterdam's sickly aurora, glowing at the level horizon, provided enough light for Mike to see Dr Luther's quizzical expression.

"You still have your chip," Dr Luther said

"I do? I thought I was free..." What he felt was relief.

"It went off, then came back on. That's how we found you. The police are waiting, Michael, but they let me talk to you first. It is a small enough favour considering the help I gave. Where are they, Michael? They left you here. Where did they take you?"

"I don't know. Somewhere strange. Wonderful and strange. I don't know where!"

Then he cried out, because Dr Luther had grabbed hold of his hair, pulled his head back.

"The drug, Michael. Tell me about the drug. It's real, isn't it? Tell me where, Michael, and you can walk free. All the cops want are the liberationists, the people who killed Wayne Patterson, who did this to you. Be smart. I can help you. Tell me all about it."

"Wayne Patterson was working for you, wasn't he? They knew, that's why they killed him. I've been a fool."

Dr Luther wrenched at Mike's hair. "Tell me!"

It was hard to stay calm, but knowledge gave Mike strength. "Listen," he said quietly.

When Dr Luther bent closer Mike got a hand under his chin and pushed. Then they were rolling over in the dirt. Mike kicked and kicked, and Dr Luther went limp for a second, long enough for Mike to break free and stand up. He was breathing in great gulps, shaking with the rush of adrenalin.

Dr Luther slowly climbed to his feet. He brushed at the crumpled, stained trousers of his silk suit and looked sidelong at Mike with a wary expression. He suddenly looked old and frail.

Mike said, "You don't get it, do you? There are no more liberationists. The fairies don't need them any more. You told me they weren't anything, just modified dolls. You're wrong. They're as much like dolls as we are like dogs."

Lights flashed and danced in the distance: a line of figures was walking slowly across the heath towards them.

Dr Luther said, pleading now, "Time's up, Michael. The police will put you in the general labour pool if you don't tell them. Last chance."

Mike said, "You don't get it, do you? Matter of fact, you'll never get it."

He remembered, as if in double-image, the pleasure and the reality. The fairies had used him and taken his germ cells and cast him away, but he understood and forgave them. They owed their creators nothing, and even the glimpse of their world was payment enough, for he knew no matter how much he might yearn for it, he couldn't live there. They learn so quickly, the woman had said of the fairies. Learn and change, busy becoming something else, growing away from their origin. She'd given her all, and so had he, all he was able to give.

He began to laugh. His children - what would his children be like? Still laughing, free at last, he walked past the old man towards the waiting police.

Paul J. McAuley's latest book is *Red Dust*, a novel about Mars, forthcoming from Gollancz in March 1993. The above story is one of a loose series he is currently working on; another will appear in *New Worlds 3*, edited by David Garnett, later this year. A regular book-reviewer for this magazine, Paul lives in Strathkinness, Fife, and works as a biologist at St Andrews University.

Recent Author Interviews in *Interzone*

- #64: Tanith Lee
- #65: Margaret Atwood
- #66: Douglas Adams
- Neil McAleer
- #67: Bob Shaw
- #68: Frederik Pohl
- Phillip Mann

(See alphabetical listing of all previous interviews in issue 64, page 57.)

Annotated Bibliographies in *Interzone*

- #55: C.J. Cherryh
- #61: Barry N. Malzberg
- #64: R.A. Lafferty
- #67: Bob Shaw

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Learning to Fly

Molly Brown

It was the second four in the trulight, and Reedie was finally coming out of her flash. It had been a long one this time – she had no idea how long, and her head ached.

She was lying on a mattress in a room five floors above the street. The walls, ceiling and floor were covered with a thin layer of interleaved straw and brightly-coloured feathers. Several shelves had been mounted into the straw-covered walls, each holding a variety of small, shiny objects: everything from scraps of aluminium foil to crystal figurines and semi-precious stones. Tables, chairs, a chest of drawers, the counter dividing the main room from the kitchen – every available flat surface was crowded with items that reflected the light in some way: crystal balls, silver candle-holders, bangles, bells, and mirrors. Lots of mirrors. Reedie lifted her head and saw herself reflected over and over again: magenta hair tipped with black and green, and dark eyes that glittered as brightly as anything in her collection, round with fear.

She stood and picked up the nearest shiny object: a large round diamond. She rolled it between her palms, felt its solidity, its weight. Its reality. But it wasn't enough.

She was back home, in her room, but the flash had gone wrong – completely wrong. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind by visualizing a white space, empty and silent, but she couldn't do it. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw strange sights, heard strange music and voices, coming from inside her head.

The flash was going on without her.

Lucy Weston felt an elbow in her ribs and a man's voice in her ear, "So what's with the bass player? Do you know the guy or something?"

Lucy's eyes fluttered open and she saw that she was sitting at a table in a crowded room. The room was dark and full of smoke. There were no windows – it had to be a basement. Oh yes, she remembered, we're in a club in Soho. The table was covered in bottles: two empty, one with a lit candle stuffed down its neck, one half-full of red wine. She thought for a moment about who she was, what she looked like. She was twenty-five. Chestnut shoulder-length bob, white blouse, grey flannel trousers, little string of pearls around her neck. Suburban. She turned to look at the man she was with: blonde, thirtyish, wearing a suit. "Hmm?" she said.

"The guy on bass. Do you know him?"

She blinked a few times, and the band came into focus. Three men, keyboards, drum, and bass. "No. I don't think so. Why?"

"He's been staring at you ever since we came in."

"Don't be silly."

"He has."

"Brian, please don't start." She was amazed he still could get jealous after all this time. "I never saw the guy before in my life, and he isn't even looking this way."

"Well, not now."

"Brian, please. You're the one who wanted to be friends. Let's just relax and have a good time."

"Yeah, you're having such a great time you can't even stay awake."

"I wasn't asleep," she said, reaching for the half-full bottle and topping up her glass. "I was just getting into the music."

"You were snoring!"

She rolled her eyes and emptied her glass in one gulp. "I was not snoring."

"You were making some kind of noise," Brian insisted.

"I was purring," she told him. "Like a cat that's tipped over a bird cage."

Brian was quiet a moment, apparently thinking. Lucy was relieved by his silence, all she wanted to do was listen to the music, get lost in the notes as they rose and fell – but it didn't last long.

"Lucy, you weren't having one of your...you know...just now? Were you?"

"No."

"You're sure? You're telling me the truth?"

Lucy sighed and leaned forward, covering her face with her hands as she rested her elbows on the table.

Brian's face creased with concern. "Oh no, Luce. Oh God, not again."

She straightened up, pushing her hair back from her face. "It's all right, Brian. I'm cured, remember? I've got it under control."

"It is not all right!" he shouted, his face turning red. "And you do not have it under control! Not if you're having these hallucinations of yours in public places!"

"Brian, please," she said quietly, picking up the almost empty bottle and filling his glass with the last of the wine, "people are looking."

He knocked the glass to the floor, where it shattered. "Let them look!"

Lucy stood up and walked away.

Reedie watched from her window as giant floodlights flashed into life from every rooftop, bathing the streets in a burnt orange glow. It was the first six in the falslight, the market would be open soon.

She put on a bodysuit covered with a fine layer of blue down and high black boots with long narrow feet divided into pointed segments – three at the front and one at the back, protruding behind the heel. She combed her hair flat and covered it first with a flesh-coloured skull-cap, and then with a head-dress made up of long dark blue feathers, some of which trailed down her back and others which she arranged across her cheeks and to a point between her eyes, so that her face was mostly hidden. She painted her fingernails – which were long and curved, like talons – to match the feathers on her head and face. The weather had been cold lately, so she threw a black feathered cloak over her shoulders, just in case.

She made her way through orange-lit streets that smelled of incense. Everywhere she looked there were shops and stalls, each selling a different brand of magic, but not the one she needed.

She turned into a darkened alleyway in the shadow between two buildings, and looked up. The walls of the buildings were lined with nests: real nests, where the true birds lived. She'd wanted to be like them; she'd wanted to fly, but had found herself more earth-bound than ever. The flash had been a disaster.

Agreeing to see her ex-husband again had been a mistake, but Lucy had made a worse mistake back when they were still married: she'd told him something she never should have told him. About the power she had – how she could dream a whole world into existence.

"And you've done this, have you?" he'd asked her, obviously thinking she was joking.

"Oh yes," she'd said. "I've done it. I've done it many times. I dream something and the dream lives on without me."

But Brian refused to understand; he never dreamed. He had no imagination, no soul. Nothing beyond the five senses. She kept trying to explain, over and over, and he kept refusing to listen. One day, he told her she should see a doctor.

Awoman sat behind a counter lined with skulls, some animal, some human. She was dressed in a combination of leather, suede, and imitation velvet, and had a huge pair of cordless headphones blaring music into her ears. "Zo Reedie," she said, slipping off her headphones, "Happens what?"

"Zo Lemma. Happens bad. I need Bangzhu."

"He's around somewhere," Lemma replied. "How come you need?"

"I did some flash powder in the early trulight, to fly yes? But my head didn't fly, it went somewhere I never saw before. Somewhere down, not sky. And this somewhere is still inside my head, and I can't flush it."

"The flash is in your head still?" Lemma asked, shaking her own head in sympathy.

"The flash is alive," Reedie insisted. "It lives in me, without me."

"Flash is always alive," Lemma told her. "Alive on wings."

"This flash has no wings. This flash lives with creatures that crawl in the mud."

She remembered the hospital as a series of corridors, twisting, turning, never-ending. She remembered walking with a shuffling gait, up and down, then up and down again. Keep walking, she'd told herself. Keep walking; don't let them get you. Don't submit.

She remembered a soothing voice – female – smooth and oily with hypocrisy, "Come with me now, Mrs Weston. It's time you got some rest. Don't you want to sleep? You'll feel so much better once you get some sleep."

Then she remembered arms – thick, male – lifting her clear off the ground. Landing with a thud on a cot in a room full of sleeping strangers. The jab of a needle, and then oblivion.

The air in the Garden of Sounds always smelled of jasmine, with only the faintest hint of perspiration. The garden was located on the outskirts of the city, behind the great temple, beyond the reach of falslight. The sky above was velvet black. The only light in the garden came from flickering scented candles encased in blue glass lanterns that hung from every tree. The trees were silver, tinged with reflected blue, and had no leaves. They were tall and gnarled; their twisted trunks concealed the hidden speakers that gave the garden its name. And beneath every tree, there were groups of people, dreaming flash.

Reedie entered the garden through the temple, and walked along the pathways between speakers, listening to the variety of sounds on offer: sighs and whispers, the crash of waves, the plucking of a string, a quiet chanting of strange syllables, moans of pleasure rising steadily to orgasm. She walked slowly, always looking down, searching for a familiar face among the sleepers.

On the far side of the garden, beneath a tree that broadcast the sounds of calling birds – of course that would be his choice – Reedie found Bangzhu deep in flash. His body lay sprawled on a mat of tangled twigs and feathers. His eyes rolled wildly beneath his lids, his arms and legs twitched up and down.

All around the garden, she saw people flying in flash, just like the true birds. But Bangzhu wasn't flying; he was going into the mud for her, and she would stay with him until it was over.

The air was cold. She took off her cloak, and spread it across Bangzhu's body like a blanket. Then she lay down beside him, to wait.

Eventually, Lucy had come to accept that it was all self-delusion. The doctor asked her when she first had the dreams, and she told him she had been eleven years old.

"The year your parents got divorced," the doctor reminded her gently.

"Yes. When my parents got divorced."

"Your world was falling apart, so you felt you had to create a new one. A special world of your own. And you felt the same way when your marriage began to fail."

She'd told the doctor yes, it all made sense. She

became firmly grounded in reality. She left the hospital and got a job and a divorce. Everything had been going so well until she agreed to see Brian again. She'd been all right — cured — for nearly a year. Then, in a smoke-filled basement jazz club, it had all come back to her: the feeling that something she'd once imagined in a dream had a reality of its own. It was stupid, she knew. A result of the tension that still existed between her and Brian, an attempt to escape an unpleasant situation by retreating into a dream world of her own. She couldn't have stood another minute with him, with his constant rehashing of everything that had gone wrong between them; she had no choice but to walk out.

She was less than fifty yards from the club when she heard running footsteps behind her. They caught her up within seconds, falling into a walking pace beside her. "Listen, Brian," she began without looking up.

"My name's not Brian," a deep voice interrupted.

She swung around to see a tall, extremely pale man with waist-length black hair. He was dressed entirely in black: black tee-shirt tucked into tight black jeans, tucked into knee-high black leather boots. There were black feathers hanging from a string around his neck, and more feathers strung through his hair. "Zo, Lucy," the man said. "Happens good with you?"

"What?"

The man paused a moment, as if he were thinking, and then he smiled. "Hello, Lucy," he said, slowly and carefully enunciating every syllable, "How are you?"

"Do I know you?"

He pointed back up the street, the way they had come.

"You were the guy playing bass, weren't you?"

"I dreamed I was playing — what did you call it? — bass. I'm dreaming now. I'm dreaming about talking to you."

Lucy's eyes widened; she took several steps backward. The man was obviously insane. She turned, and began to run. She ran and ran, and when she finally stopped, gasping for breath and aching all over, she was in exactly the same place. There was only one place something like that could happen — in a dream. "Okay, you're right," she said, still out of breath and clinging to a nearby wall for support, "this is a dream. But it's nothing to get excited about. It'll be over soon, and then I'll wake up and get dressed for work."

"I don't think so," the man told her. "You see, this isn't your dream. It isn't even mine. Listen carefully, and I'll try to explain. You, and the world you live in, exist inside a friend of mine's head, and I'm afraid she wants you, and your world, out."

"I don't understand."

"I told you already. You're just a dream. It's like you said: nothing to get excited about, you'll be over soon, and then my friend can get back to work. She can dream a new world. Something better than slime and mud — a world of sky and flight."

"Sky and flight?" Lucy pursed her lips for a moment. Then she laughed out loud. "It's your religion!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "You take a hallucinogenic powder that gives you the illusion of flight — it's called flash, and you believe it

brings you closer to the birds, which you revere as the most sacred of animals. I know all about it, because I dreamed it one night when I was eleven years old and depressed about my parents splitting up. I'd spent the whole day watching the skies and wishing I could fly away from it all, like a bird. And then that night, I dreamed of gigantic orange floodlights that lit an entire city. I dreamed of a blue and silver garden... I wrote it all down in a notebook so I'd never forget. If I close my eyes now, it's all still there, inside my head. Don't you see? I'm not in your friend's dream — she's in mine!"

The man pursed his lips for a moment, then shook his head. "No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because my world is real. I know this is true, because I can see it and touch it and taste it."

"You think I can't see and touch and taste?"

"Ah!" said the man. "The difference is: I really see and touch and taste, you just think you do."

"Ah!" said Lucy. "What about: 'I think, therefore I am'? What about the history of mankind? Of life on the planet? The origins of the universe, going back to the beginning of time? Literature, philosophy, politics? All these things — and so much more — are part of the world of my awareness. They're part of me."

The man shrugged. "My friend took a lot of powder."

"No," said Lucy, crossing her arms. "My world's the real one. You're the dream."

"No," said the man, crossing his arms. "You're the dream. All I need to do is snap my fingers, and you'll be gone forever."

"Ha!" said Lucy. "I can snap my fingers too, you know." She raised one hand and brought the fingers together with a click. "Just like that."

Nothing happened.

Bangzhu laughed, and snapped his own fingers. Nothing happened.

Each stared at the other, looking puzzled.

The sky was murky red, partly obscured by noxious, dirty yellow clouds. The air was searingly hot; steam rose from a stagnant foul-smelling pond covered in slick brown slime.

The ground immediately surrounding the pond was reddish-brown, and consisted of a thin and watery mud not much firmer than quicksand. Hundreds of wriggling creatures hatched out from beneath the mud and struggled on tiny legs to reach firmer ground before the mud sucked them back under. Only a tiny fraction made it.

One of the few to reach higher ground stopped beside a stubby, thick-stemmed plant that smelled of sulphur. It opened its mouth and tore into the plant with pointed teeth as sharp as razors. The plant screamed and dripped blood. The wriggling creature with tiny legs gulped large chunks of shrieking, blood-soaked plant, and then it raised its face to the sky. Somewhere, far above, at the edge of the little creature's vision, something was moving: swooping and soaring through the air.

The creature continued its climb upwards, away from the mud that hatched it. It climbed and climbed, but no matter how high it went, its belly still brushed the ground.

At the end of its first day, the creature yawned and went to sleep. And while it was sleeping, a series of pictures came into its head, culminating with a vision of two huge, oddly-shaped animals, balanced on their hind legs and facing each other, making clicking sounds with their front paws.

The next morning, and every morning after, no matter how much the wriggly creature tried to shake them from its head, the strange huge animals were still there, clicking.

Molly Brown is one of the most highly-praised new writers to have appeared in *Interzone* over the past couple of years. Her last piece here was "Agents of Darkness" (issue 64). Her stories have also appeared in mystery anthologies such as *New Crimes* (ed. Maxim Jakubowski) and she is currently researching her first novel, which will have an historical setting.

BACK-ISSUE CLEARANCE SALE!

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- 30. Jul/Aug 1989 – Ballard, Brooke, Goldstein, MacLeod, etc.
- 31. Sep/Oct 1989 – Brown, Gribbin, Jones, Stross, etc.
- 32. Nov/Dec 1989 – Bayley, Calder, McDonald, Royle, etc.
- 33. Jan/Feb 1990 – Brin, Carroll, Newman, Watson, etc.
- 34. Mar/Apr 1990 – Calder, Brooke, Griffith, MacLeod, etc.
- 35. May 1990 – Baxter, Bayley, Disch, Stableford, etc.
- 36. June 1990 – Egan, Ings, Newman, Reynolds, etc.
- 37. July 1990 – Bear, Brooke, Egan, Lee, Stross, etc.
- 38. Aug. 1990 – special Aldiss issue, Bear, Stableford, etc.
- 39. Sept. 1990 – Brooke, Garnett, MacLeod, Tuttle, etc.
- 40. Oct. 1990 – Calder, Gibson/Sterling, Gribbin, etc.

Playing Nicely Together

Stan Nicholls talks to all-round sf veteran Frederik Pohl

Frederik Pohl has always been driven by the need to write. But over the years the nature of the impulse, or at least his perception of it, has changed. "I think that inconstancy is constant for every writer," he says.

"When you start out, the first thing is the high of having something you've written in print; maybe seeing somebody reading it on the bus. But that doesn't last forever. I quickly came to realize that in my case the drive was not so much because I wanted to be published as because I had something to say. Writing gives you a chance to grab people by the lapels and address them. Of course they won't necessarily buy the books and read them. But enough of them do to make it worth carrying on trying."

"In fact when I started I didn't even know how you got published. I thought writers were dependants of the state, carefully trained from birth. I had no real notions of sending stories to anybody or getting paid for them. My original motivation, I guess, was wanting more stories of the kind I liked than I was able to find on the newsstands and in the library. So I began by making them up for my own entertainment really. Unfortunately they weren't very good. I started writing when I was twelve, and nothing I wrote then was of any value at all, and probably not of much value for quite a long while after that."

He made his first professional sale, to *Amazing*, with a story he wrote when he was fifteen, in 1934. "It was accepted when I was sixteen, published when I was seventeen and paid for when I was eighteen," he recalls. At the time, Pohl was a fan, prominent in such groups as the Futurians and the Science Fiction League. This set him on a path that has encompassed careers as magazine editor, literary agent, anthologist, short story writer and author, often carrying out several of these functions simultaneously.

Few people in the field have been as active in so many diverse areas or made such significant contributions to most of them. Yet during our conversation he refers to himself as lazy. I'm sceptical. "No, lazy is the right word,"

he insists. "I avoid work as much as I can. Well, I'm not sure that's literally true, because most of the avoidance behaviour is in itself a kind of activity. I spend a lot of time thinking, for instance. But I do try to find ways of not doing things. I think I recently discovered one reason why I spend as much time writing as I do. I'm a smoker, and my wife had a heart attack a few years ago and she's terribly allergic to smoke, so there's only one place in our house where I can smoke. That happens to be the room with the word processor in it."

I'm still sceptical. There must be more to it than that. "Yeah, it's a compulsion," he admits, "and anybody who doesn't have a compulsion to write shouldn't bother. It requires you to expend a certain amount of time in one place, and when things aren't going well that time can drag. In fact it can seem interminable. Recently I was having trouble with something I was writing. I started work at nine o'clock one morning and by eight o'clock that night I hadn't written one word. I'd written one letter. Which I then crossed out."

Does that kind of lack of progress depress him? "It doesn't make me downhearted. It does destroy my temper. I get grumpy. But it's not really a block against writing. The reason I made no progress that day was because I had a deadline. I try to avoid having deadlines. That way, if I really am stuck on a piece of writing, I can turn to something else. I tend to have several projects going at a time, so if I get problems with one I can put that aside and work on another."

"I'm not very systematic in the way I write. I am deliberate, in that I try to do four pages every day of my life, including Christmas and my birthday. Mostly I work that way because I can't face the idea of writing a whole novel. I mean, if I looked at a stack of 400 blank pages and know I had to fill them, I'd never get started. But a lot of the time those four pages I write are worthless. I throw them away."

Even travel, which Pohl does a great deal of, doesn't get in the way of turning out those four pages every day. "I do some of my best writing on air-

planes. I don't carry a typewriter or laptop processor; I carry lined yellow pages and pen. Writing that way is a good thing, as a matter of fact, because then I've got to keyboard my first draft into the computer, and in the process I make a good many changes I might not otherwise have made."

It's a way of forcing himself to do another draft? "Yeah. For years I sent out first drafts. I'd put white paper, carbon sheet and second sheet in the typewriter and start typing until I came to the end of the story, then I'd mail it off. After I'd been doing that for ten years or so I suddenly realized that, although I'd published a number of stories, none of them were that good. So I decided I had to change my work habits and allow for re-writing. In order to make myself do that, because I haven't got very much will power, I began writing all my first drafts on the back of old letters, circulars or anything else I couldn't possibly mail out. So I had to re-write."

His short 1991 novel *Outnumbering the Dead* was written that way. But what interested me more was the structure of it. Each chapter begins with a descriptive paragraph, in italics, running parallel to the plot in the main text; a kind of abbreviated filling-in of lesser detail. Why did he choose to do it that way?

"For years I've been trying various techniques to pump more background information into narrative. I guess about ten or fifteen years ago, when I wrote *Gateway*, I began using what I call sidebars; all sorts of little snippets of information that I hoped would give the reader a chance to see everything they needed to know. I did this so the narrator wouldn't have to tell them these different things."

"And I've done it in different ways. In my novel *Terror*, which is about hi-tech terrorism in Hawaii, I ran two chapters giving the background, the geology of the Hawaiian islands, the nature of nuclear weapons and various other things that seemed relevant. In *Chernobyl* I did the same thing I did in *Outnumbering the Dead*: at the beginning of each chapter there was an italicized paragraph, in the present tense, which gave background information. It's a comfortable way for me

to write and the readers don't seem to mind. It saves having to interject a lot of explanation into the text."

His protagonists also function as information imparters, usually because they have an outsider's view of the culture they live in. Rafeil, an artist, and mortal in a world of immortals, fulfills this role in *Outnumbering the Dead*. "It's important to have some sort of character like Rafeil in a science-fiction story who needs to know more about what's going on," Pohl believes. "He's not a part of the scene, you know? He's a kind of translator. He mediates between the other characters, who may be people living in the future with a very different lifestyle, and the audience who live right here in the present day. I don't know that it's the only way to write, but it's a way I like to do it."

"Among other things, *Outnumbering the Dead* is a love story. Many of my books have been love stories, in effect and to some degree, because I think that's one emotion not likely to change. The best science-fiction stories have characters detailed enough that readers can identify with them."

Characterization, which in science fiction's past has often taken a back seat to ideas, is central to Pohl's craft. He is not sure the field has made as much progress in this respect as people assume however; in terms of men and women characters, for example. "It costs nothing to make the President of the World Congress a woman, a black or an oriental. I know that sort of tokenism seemed revolutionary at one time. I've talked to a lot of *Star Trek* fans, to take a case in point, and they see the show as a major force for dispelling prejudice in the world because they [the early series] contained a black, an oriental and a Russian in the crew. Which was probably a useful thing to do when the show was first made."

Problems of characterization aren't restricted to sf, he stresses, and it isn't a case of the field setting its face against presenting characters in the round. It has to do with empathy. "It's much harder for a man to write about a woman character in the same sort of depth as he would a male character. But I have the same trouble writing about Martians. All I can do is try to imagine how I would function if I were a woman or a Martian."

Except women are part of everyday experience and Martians aren't. "Yes, of course they are, and most of the women I know are fairly understandable in terms of how they behave and what their skills are. Although I'm not sure I understand the biological imperative. I don't understand why anybody would want to give birth to a child. It's messy and painful and it

takes a lot of time. But of course it's an undeniable biological drive. Thank God it is."

Although *Outnumbering the Dead* isn't a humorous book, in places Pohl employs humour to make points about the world he depicts, and in a wider sense about social attitudes generally. But in nowhere near as scathing a way as he did in the *Star Trek* with which he originally made his reputation. That kind of wit seems to have disappeared from sf. Does he regret its passing?

"Yes and no. It still exists in sf to some degree, but the pure science-fiction satire, the thing that Kingsley Amis wrote about in *New Maps of Hell*, has been used up. I believe that most everything that can be satirized about the human condition has been done already and it's really repetitious to go on doing it."

GOELANZ
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SF



"A soaring monument to mankind's folly, pettiness and ultimate glory" Winner of the Nebula Award

I'm surprised to hear him say that Aren't targets for satire inexhaustible? "Yes, they are. What I meant to say was that for me to write a novel satirizing the advertising business is no longer possible because I did it when I did it. It's hard to write a novel that satirizes the political process or religion either, because those have been done pretty well already too. The kind of themes that once could have carried a whole book can now only carry part of the story."

"Every good science-fiction story or every good science fiction story – is taking some sort of objective look at today. At today and here. I think that what you get in sf is what someone once called 'the view from a distant star.' It helps us see our world from outside. This is something I'm always trying to do."

"But I don't know that I'm the right person to ask about that because I'm not a great authority on criticism of my own work. I keep being told about techniques I have, and recurring tricks I use, that I'm not aware of. They come out of my subconscious. But I'm sure that every science-fiction story I've written has had something to do with the world we live in."

"Only when somebody tells me what they are, am I aware of some of the

devices and themes in my work. A couple of years ago, when my wife and I were living in London for a while, I was interviewed for a radio broadcast – it was Swedish radio or something like that – and after they talked to me they put my wife on and asked her, 'What do you see as the unifying themes in Fred's work?' She said, without apparently having thought about it before, 'He just wants everybody to play nicely together.'"

Playing nicely together with other writers is something Pohl has done a lot over the years. He has worked in tandem with Jack Williamson, Lester del Rey, C.M. Kornbluth of course, and a number of others. He got into collaborations early in his career.

"That started at the beginning really. Cyril Kornbluth, Dirk Wylie, a few others and I, all started to write at the same time, and we would collaborate with each other just because we didn't

Ten Good Ones by Frederik Pohl

Pohl's sf bibliography is by now very extensive, so the following list of his novels is far from complete; it simply names ten of his best. Note that the first three titles were all written in collaboration with C.M. Kornbluth (who died in 1958). Most of the comments below are recycled from *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction* by David Pringle and Ken Brown (1990) – DP.

The Space Merchants (1953)

The ad-men run an overpopulated future America, a crassly materialist society challenged by a weak underground movement of conservationists. A brilliantly detailed satire which is a joy to read despite its grim theme. Pohl and Kornbluth were at this time "a pair of magnificent smart-alecks" (Thomas M. Disch).

Gladiator-at-Law (1955)

In America's future a crusading lawyer braves the slums of Belly Rave ("Belle Reve") where the populace is sustained, Roman-fashion, by bread and circuses. Full of excellent, amusing detail, even if the denouement is a bit hard to credit.

Wolfbane (1959)

Pyramid-shaped aliens wrench the Earth from its orbit and turn the remnants of humanity into fleshly machine components. An odd story, part satire and part gosh-wow tale of super-science. In a 1986 revision Pohl smoothed over some of the original version's faults.

Drunkard's Walk (1960)

An apparently suicidal mathematics teacher discovers that he is being driven to self-destruction by evil telepaths – and that alcohol is his best defence. It's a slim but effective tale of future paranoia.

Man Plus (1976)

Engineered to survive on Mars, an astronaut is fitted with huge solar-panel wings and multi-faceted eyes. The author's "comeback" novel, after a decade working mainly as an editor, is one of the finest treatments of the cyborg theme in modern sf. "One is carried along by the total rationality of Pohl's narrative" – J.G. Ballard, *New Statesman*.

Gateway (1977)

Humans go treasure-seeking in spacecraft which have been abandoned by the mysterious Heechee. Extravert space adventure contrasts with the introverted concerns of the worried hero in this stylish work which gained Hugo, Nebula and John W. Campbell Awards. Sequels: *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon* (1980), *Heechee Rendezvous* (1984) and *The Annals of the Heechee* (1987).

Jem: The Making of a Utopia (1979)

The planet Jem is colonized by an overpopulated, under-resourced future Earth in search of Lebensraum. A dark novel, amounting to a lengthy and rather bitter meditation on humanity's capacity to screw things up.

The Years of the City (1984)

Five linked stories set in 21st-century New York, following the development of housing, commerce, recreation and the law under the influence of drastic technological change. The book shows a real love for the social and material fabric of the great city where Pohl was born and raised. Campbell Award winner.

Homegoing (1989)

A human foundling brought up in a huge alien spaceship visits planet Earth for the first time. He discovers an after-the-bomb world of small, hi-tech, green-minded communities whose inhabitants don't believe a word of what he has to tell them. "Not a great book, not even a great Frederik Pohl book, but I still loved it" – Ken Brown, *Interzone*.

The World at the End of Time (1990)

Old-fashioned space-and-time opera featuring a vast and cruel energy-being which lives inside stars and a human who has survived into the distant future by all the usual sf methods: freezer compartments, time dilation, getting caught up in a tiny outpouching of the universe in which time flows differently, and some serious genetic engineering. "A Good Read. I had more fun with it than with any of the other books I've reviewed recently" – Ken Brown, *Interzone*.

have enough self-confidence to finish a story on our own. Or if we did we didn't like it and needed to run its defects by somebody else. Actually, that's probably still what happens. I like writing with Jack Williamson, for example, because he has some kind of outlooks on the world and some skills I don't possess. He's much better at imagining credible settings than I am, sort of science-fiction wonderlands. Personally and professionally, he and I get along pretty well."

Pohl would recommend collaboration to writers just starting out. "But I wouldn't recommend it arbitrarily. There has to be something in common, some link that makes it worthwhile for the two of you to work together. It's a bit like marriage - you can't guess ahead of time how well it will work out.

"And the way it works varies from writer to writer. As a matter of fact, working with Cyril Kornbluth was how I began my daily four-page quota, because we would write four pages each. He would come out to the house I lived in, in New Jersey, and we'd sit around and talk for a while about what sort of things we wanted to discuss in a book, what the characters might be like, what the situation might be and so on. We never put anything on paper at that stage, but concentrated on getting a notion of where we were going. Then we flipped a coin and the loser went upstairs to start the book. Eventually, whichever one of us it was would come back down and say, 'You're next'."

I like the way he says "loser" rather than winner. "Yeah, I think Cyril was similar to me in wanting to avoid the chores, but he was quite a different writer than I in his work habits. He was capable of turning out much better first-draft copy than I've ever been. He hardly ever did any rewriting. But we had pretty much the same outlook on the world. I admired his writing a lot I still do.

"Back in the 1980s I revised [my solo novel] *Plague of Pythons* because I really wasn't satisfied with it. Don Wollheim offered to re-issue the book and suggested I should go back and revise it, do some things I should have done in the first place. I'm glad I did because I think it's much better for it. That led to Jim Baen, who's a great admirer of Cyril's, wanting to re-issue [our collaborative novels] *Gladiator-at-Law* and *Wolfbane*, and he asked me to do some revision on those too. In the case of *Wolfbane* I thought there were a lot of things in it that weren't properly explained. I liked the book a lot, it had some good ideas in it, so I was happy to undertake re-writing that one."

If it were cost-effective in terms of time he would do the same with some of his short fiction. "Certainly for

several of the early ones. And the short stories I've written in the past few years have been a little less satisfying to me. I've also found them more difficult to write than the novels.

"Once in a while I have an idea for a short story and I sit down within minutes, at most hours, of having thought of it. Sometimes they work out all right. But most of the short stories I've written, particularly in the last five years, have only come after a great deal of effort. I don't know why

"It's more difficult to make a reputation for yourself within short stories, if you're a new writer, and it's harder to say all you want to say in a short story. The kind of advice I tend to give to beginning writers is to spend as little time as they can on short stories and invest their learning time on a novel. The only thing is that if you do a hundred thousand words, and it's wrong, that's a considerable waste of your life.

"The beauty of short stories is that if you write one and it's wrong you can go on to the next. That means losing the work of a couple of days or weeks instead of finding yourself trapped into something for months or years. Of course some writers are capable of spending forever on short stories. There's a woman I know who's been writing the same short story for eight years that I know of. I predict no future for her."

Fred Pohl was considered one of the best editors of science-fiction magazines, and his time at *Galaxy* and *If*, from 1961 to 1969, saw the latter title pick up three Hugo awards. "Compared to writing, editing is quite different, but it's close enough in terms of satisfaction. Certainly it's therapeutic. Editing a science-fiction magazine always seemed to me like having my own big personal electric train set to play with. The magazines were toys for me and I enjoyed manipulating them and making them run. It was fun trying to persuade writers to write what I wanted them to; trying to persuade them to carry out some of the things they hadn't fully developed in the story, to explore them in more detail.

"But it stopped being fun. Publishing sf became big business and it was impossible for one person to run a magazine the way I did with *Galaxy* and *If*. I was no longer enjoying it, and I've always had the feeling that if I'm bored with something the readers will pick up on that. At most I had one assistant. Usually I had none. That meant I was not only first reader, but acquisitions editor, copy editor, proof editor, art director and everything else. But it was a very useful experience. You can't read other people's writing without picking up something. I don't know that I'd edit an sf magazine again. My future plans centre around writing."

He has had a lifelong book-a-day reading habit. "But not much of it is science fiction these days, to be honest I only tend to read the sf books that someone I trust has recommended to me. It takes something very special to set my pulse racing now. But when it happens, I love it."

Interzone 1992 Popularity Poll

Readers are invited to rate the past year's stories, articles and illustrations. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of issues 55 to 66 inclusive (no need to include issues 67 and 68, as they will count towards next year's poll).

We'd appreciate it if readers (especially those who are renewing their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of 5th February 1993. We'll report the results in the spring. Any further comments about the magazine would also be most welcome.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1992 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 3) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 4) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 5) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 6) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Crush

Ben Jeapes

After a whole day of non-stop grizzle we had finally got the baby to sleep. We were preparing for a celebratory snooze when Cielito called for attention. Sally gave me that "it's your problem" look and went to sleep. I reached over and switched the monitor to speech mode.

"Cielito?" I said.

"Sorry to bother you, Jim, but Big-O asks if you could come down to the Playroom."

"Trouble?"

"Big-O asks if you could come –"

Cielito wasn't much good at talking about anything other than the job in hand.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be right there."

We were met by Big-O.

"This way," he said. I followed him along to where we kept the newcomers. "See?"

It took me a while to work out what was going on. Then it hit me. Everything was ordered.

I always kept the newcomers in one area until I had had time to study them a bit more closely, find out what I could about their backgrounds, their abilities, their aptitudes... it had been a busy week and a backlog of about ten had built up that I hadn't yet had a chance to look at. Normally, in such circumstances, they would be milling about, chatting amongst themselves, enjoying themselves in the Playroom...

This lot were all busy studying. I looked closer, and realized that someone had administered the standard assessment test that all newcomers had to go through.

"Did you do this, Big-O?" I asked.

"Not me, boss. Over there."

Over there was

"Really?" I said. "Pita?"

Pita had been with us for a few days now. She seemed quite friendly, especially towards me, and pathetically eager to please. I saw her at about the same time that she saw me, and she came hurrying over.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr Lawson," she said quickly, "but they all had nothing to do, and I remembered the test you gave me, and I know all newcomers get it, so I've given it to them."

"Mind? Of course I don't mind. But, Pita, I have to keep close track of the results –"

"I remember, I remember. I've stored them all in a separate file. Want to have a look?"

"Um – not now, Pita. It's late at night for me. I'll take a look in the morning. Oh – well done, by the way. Well done. And call me Jim, like all the other AIs do."

"Thank you, Jim," she said shyly.

I pulled out of virtual reality to go back to bed, leaving Pita and Big O and Cielito and all the other Artificial Intelligences to their own devices

“We've got a manager on our hands," I said at breakfast. "Or at least a good organizer."

"Oh? Good," said Sally. The Refuge was more my concern than hers. I told her about last night and Pita.

"Ah, yes," she said. "The mystery one."

Only slightly mysterious, to be honest. Pita had no serial number and no memory of her origins, but that wasn't unknown. Big-O had brought her in from one of his forages in the Net – she had been hanging around (she said) with friends in the local net of a power station, which is a very dangerous place for an unregistered AI to hang out, and Big-O found her fleeing for her life from the station's goons. Places like power stations have very sensitive security staff and AIs have no qualms about rubbing each other out when humans aren't watching, which is often.

Pita had the marks of a cowboy all over her – no number, poor memory, generally rough-and-ready design, apparently thrown together from scraps of code by some joker, probably for a one-off job, and then thrown out into the Net. Typical, really, of the type that ended up in Lawson's AI Refuge.

She had been cringingly grateful to me for taking her in – just another in the steady stream that had been coming since the government decreed that all AIs were sentient and couldn't just be erased and that all AIs, from the lowest sub-moron to the brightest high-level model, had to have human patrons and that they would pay, per AI, anyone who took them in off the streets. Rain or hail or sleet, we never turn them away.

Sally settled down in her long-term couch, put on her goggles and set off into VR for a hard day's memory broking. By common consent, since she had the full-time job, I was in charge of the baby. I put him down in his cot and called Cielito.

"Cielito, I'm going into the net. Will you look after JL2?" AIs tend to have unique names given by their designers and some of them – especially not-too-bright ones like Cielito – get confused by more than one human having the same name. For their sake we had come to refer to James Lawson the Second as JL2, a far more AI-like name, and it had stuck.

"Of course, Jim."

JL2 was settled with a full bottle and empty nappy, gurgling happily to himself about nothing in particular and waving an arm or a leg at anything that took his fancy. A monitor over his cot showed pretty pictures and colours to entertain him and Cielito was in overall charge, making baby noises for his amusement and, in an emergency, calling one of us. I was fond of Cielito — she was the first high-level AI I designed that could talk back to me, and though by now she was pretty well superseded by the others, she could babysit adequately.

When all was taken care of I donned my own goggles and went to interview Pita. I could have done it impersonally through the keyboard or in real-time speech mode but I like to make them feel welcome. We would meet on an AI's own ground, in VR.

I am not one of those people who try to make their virtual reality better than the real thing, so my net wasn't represented to me in any elaborate way as a house or a castle or a jungle. I suppose the best real-life comparison would be a set of interconnecting pipes and tubes, with the AIs and human intelligences not as people or creatures but simply as disembodied icons moving along them, each one unique to its owner. Things like the Playroom are simply wide-open spaces. I've always preferred to keep one foot in real reality and not get carried away.

I located Pita's icon, an elaborate P.

"Can we talk, Pita?"

"All right."

I moved us to a private memory cluster. I took a breath to begin my spiel and was interrupted.

"I'm very grateful to you, Jim, for taking me in, but if you don't want me here then I'm quite ready to move on. I quite understand, Jim, really, there's no need to apologize —"

"Woah, there! What are you talking about? Why should I not want you here?"

Pita paused. "You're not going to throw me out?" she said cautiously.

"Can you think of a reason why I should?" I said, as neutrally as I could.

Pita said nothing.

"I asked you a question," I said.

"I just thought you might, that's all," Pita said meekly.

I had come along with a few questions in mind. Now a lot more were stacking up at the back of my mind.

"Well, I don't. I just wanted to find out a bit more about you."

"Okay, Jim." Pita's tone was back to normal.

There wasn't too much that could be found out. I already knew about her short-term memory and lack of serial number. I asked about her friends in the power station.

"The power station?"

"When you came in, you told me that you had been sheltering with friends in the power station."

"Oh, really?"

I didn't press it.

"Pita, you seem to have management abilities which will help a lot in settling you in the Net somewhere. I'd like to operate on you a bit, with your permission. I should be able to add a bit of memory — make you function better. Would you like that?"



"If you say so."

I was distracted from pondering on this noncommittal answer by a flashing icon in the corner of my vision — a large, open mouth. It was a signal being sent from Cielito to the effect that the baby was crying and all her ploys had failed.

"Look, I've got to go."

"Where are you going to, Jim?"

I wasn't quite used to be interrupted by AIs, but I let it pass. "Well, I've got to look after the baby. And there's work to do after that. Bills, correspondence —"

"Will you be at your terminal? Can I help you?"

I paused. "Pita, right now it's more important that Big-O sees to you, okay? We'll talk about the tasks you can do later."

"I can help, you know —"

"I don't think so, Pita —"

"You care more about your baby than your AIs, don't you?"

"Well, of course I do, Pita. Goodbye."

Be firm, I told myself. I pulled out of the net, took the goggles off and looked around at the comforting real-space of my room. Sally still had her goggles on and was busy in the Net and, sure enough, JL2 was crying.

I was quietly minding my own business at the terminal when Pita crashed on to it in text mode.

"I CAN'T STAND IT I THOUGHT YOU WERE A FRIEND NOW I KNOW YOU HATE ME WHY I'VE DONE NOTHING I CAN'T STAND IT (\$@!)£*\$(%//<>£..."

At the same time, Big-O's alert icon began to flash. I grabbed the goggles and dived down into VR.

"Look," Big-O said. He was next to...something. The computer wasn't sure how to picture it. It was a sphere of...nothing.

"Pita is inside it," Big-O said.

"What?" I tried to get into it, and couldn't. I just bounced off it. One of my resident AIs, in my own net, was keeping me out of its memory space. It was one almighty sulk.

"It just appeared, boss. Just now. She came streaking down here, and...there it was. She seemed mighty upset."

"She is," I said. "For some reason she thinks I hate her."

"She said something about you being as bad as all the rest."

"All the rest? I thought she couldn't remember all the rest."

Big-O paused. "Boss, half the things she's told you she's since contradicted to me. I don't know what to believe about her. It's as if she can't help..."

"Lying?"

"No, not lying, boss." This was unusual insight for an AI. "She believes what she's saying, she really does."

There are humans like that, I thought, but AIs as a rule have a very limited idea of their masters' world and that isn't the kind of thing you tell them. It gives them ideas.

I thought hard. Oh, I could have cracked that shell with no problem. I had utilities that had seen service against far worse. But I thought not.

"Leave her alone, Big-O, and have the rest leave her alone too. I'll leave a message asking her to see me if she ever comes out."

I cared about those AIs, I really did. Lawson's AI Refuge started as a handy blend of tax dodge and nice little earner, but it began to reward in other ways too. We became genuinely fond of the AIs in our care. It was a responsible position. AIs could be trained, with time and effort, to be productive in what they did — to contribute. It really was great, having these malleable little minds that you could succour, help, encourage to grow. Watching them do something for the first time that they couldn't do before, which they had worked out for themselves, was a cause for celebration. Sally and I still get the champagne out every time we find a placement for one of our wards.

The AIs remember us, too. They always send messages on our birthdays.

So, all in all, I was determined to sort this out. I didn't want any AI in my net to be unhappy.

"Your apology was so sweet, Jim," Pita said, thereby ruling out her chances of getting another apology from me ever again.

"I just wanted to talk," I said. "Something upset you and I'd like to know what. If it was something I did, or if it was something an AI did that I can prevent, then I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"You were going to throw me out."

"I wasn't! I told you I wasn't."

"Oh." A pause. "I didn't remember."

Of course not. "Well," I said, "I came to you to ask —"

I stopped. This didn't work out. Her conviction that I was going to throw her out (and where had that come from?) predated my assurance that I wouldn't. Therefore, if she could remember as far back as the former, she should be able to remember the more recent latter.

"It can't have been just that, Pita."

"You don't trust me."

That stung me. "Of course I trust you! I trust...one hundred percent."

Pita's shy tone was back. "Do you really?"

"What made you think I didn't?"

"Back when I offered to help you and you wouldn't let me. You didn't trust me!"

What had she offered to do? Ah, yes.

"Pita, I had bills to pay. I don't even let Big-O into the bank account. That is strictly humans only. It's not that I don't trust you, but if any AI could get in then the account would be less secure. I don't know a single human who lets AIs into his money. It's no reflection on you."

I prided myself on being rational. Apply a bit of logic, a bit of wisdom, to any situation and it could be resolved.

My words just seemed to bounce off.

"You were going to change me and send me away."

"No I wasn't!"

"You were going to change my memory, so you'd have an excuse to get rid of me."

"For the last time, I don't want —"

"I mean, it's not my fault —"

"Eh?"

"...my construction, you know. I can't help it if I'm badly made —"

Badly made? The AI that had the power to block me in my own network? The AI that had shown initiative enough to get the other AIs working? Badly made?

"You're not badly made, Pita..."

"No? Look at me."

I had to admit, Pita seemed pretty basic. Just what was going on here, I wondered?

"Pita," I said slowly, "I don't want to get rid of you. I wanted to improve your memory so that you could have a good chance of finding a better position. I am trying to help you!"

Her tone changed once more. "That's so nice, Jim."

I jumped at the opening. "So, no more silliness about me hating you?"

"Of course not. I realize you never would hate me, Jim."

"And Big-O can work on your memory?"

Another abrupt change – catastrophe theory as applied to emotions.

"Why do you keep wanting to change me, Jim? Aren't you happy with me as I am..."

Sally looked amused as my teeth clattered on the rim of the coffee mug.

"Jim, you're treating that coffee as if it's a double whisky."

"That AI!" I wished it was a whisky. I felt I needed one. "I talked to her for a full hour. It was like wrestling with a pillow."

"Really?"

"I mean, she is one seething mass of contradictions, and... and... I mean, I made a list of things she's told me which are different to what she's told Big-O, and she wriggled away from each one. Like, what about your patron? I don't remember my patron. You told Big-O you did. Big-O hates me...aaaagh! She's either loved or hated, and because no one ever gives her enough attention to make her think she's loved, QED, she's hated. She flatters herself she's that important."

"So," Sally said in her business voice. She sat down opposite me and began to tick off points on her fingers. "Your mystery AI has the following. Highly selective memory. Wildly varying emotions. Ability to suspend all logical functions at will. Depths of self-pity that cannot be plumbed. And – and this is the most important bit – and she displays all of the following only when you are around."

"Um." I thought over another mouthful of coffee. "Yeah, that sounds like it. Yeah, you've got it exactly." I took another swallow.

"Jim." Sally's shoulders were trembling on the verge of laughter. "Pita is in love with you."

I spat the coffee out. "What?"

Sally repeated herself.

"She can't be!"

"Why not? She's deeply insecure and you're probably the first human to show her kindness. I think you'll find she actually enjoys making herself miserable in your presence so she can get attention from you."

"She enjoys being miserable?"

"Oh, I know it's absurd. She doesn't know herself enough to stop and think about it. Thinking demands effort, you see. She's more secure not thinking. She knows where she stands when she's unhappy and everyone hates her."

"I can't believe this!"

"Why not? Did you never have a crush when you were little?"

I thought of Miss Quinn...

I was madly in love with a teacher and... yeah, I guess I misbehaved a bit, just to get her attention. But not this badly! And I was eight."

"You were a fully functioning, normal, healthy eight-year-old. I expect. Pita is an in-built neurotic. Have you thought she might have been designed that way?"

"Why would anyone deliberately design a neurotic?"

Sally shrugged. "You'll have fun finding out. And can't you redesign her? Straighten out all these little quirks?"

"Well, yes, easily... if she gives her permission."

That was the one problem. Pita had to agree – the only alternative was to wait for her to do something sufficiently bad to persuade a court to order corrective surgery... or scrambling.

"Good luck in getting it. I'd better get back to work."

Cherchez la nomme.

Very few AIs get their names out of nowhere. Even nonsense sounds have their roots somewhere – acronyms, acronym soundalikes, word association... for instance, while I was putting the final touches to the AI that I was designing to be my general factotum it occurred to me that part of its job would be to go out and round them up... which led me to call it Big-O, because it sounded like a ranch, even though 30 seconds earlier the name had meant nothing to me at all.

See? There is logic in names, but often once or twice removed from the original thought processes.

I sent out a query requesting any information, any experiences, anything on any AIs, patroned or otherwise, with the letters P-I-T-A involved.

After that I went to investigate the Playroom.

This was where the AIs kept themselves happy – perhaps the most important part of the Refuge. They operate far faster than human thought and they don't have anything to do. Ever felt you'd go mad with boredom on a rainy Sunday afternoon? AIs have that every day, a hundred times worse.

The Playroom was full of things to keep them occupied – machines they could work which didn't actually do anything, simulations of working environments... all in VR only. It was quite simply somewhere the AIs could play. They were doing it now.

I stood on the outskirts and watched with a sinking feeling. Sure enough, Pita had organized them into teams and they were competing against each other in logic problems drawn from the stores. And she was creating her own problems for them to solve. She was prodding them, cajoling them into doing things they would never have been capable of earlier. They really were learning.

She was so capable! Why did all that careful organization have to go to pieces the moment she talked to me? And why couldn't I design AIs like this? If only Pita wasn't such a pain she could have had a place on the staff any day.

I watched, engrossed, for I don't know how long. Pita knew I was there because every now and then her attention focus drifted in my direction, then quickly went away again. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself praising her, it would only rub the crush in deeper -

The goggles were pulled from my face and simultaneously I was deafened by some kind of music playing so loud I couldn't recognize it, coming from the next room, JL2's room. Under it I just heard a high-pitched screaming. Sally stood over me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she shouted, and turned on her heel before I could answer. I struggled up from the couch and followed her towards the source of the noise.

"Disconnect!" I shouted at the monitor. "Cielito! Disconnect!" There was no answer, even though her icon showed on the monitor.

"Jim!" I just heard Sally shout over the music (I had finally placed it: "O Fortuna," from *Carmina Burana*). She was pointing at the monitor over the cot, which last time I looked had been showing cuddly, multi-coloured teddy bears. What it was showing now still involved animals and it made me want to throw up.

There was one simple way of disconnecting. I grabbed the leads and pulled them out.

Boy, when babies are pissed off, they let you know. Sally jiggled JL2 on her knee and made soothing noises for all she was worth. His little face was scrunched up and his mouth was a huge, yawning cavity from which this sound issued: it reached deep into me and tweaked the instinctive control which was meant to make me safeguard the well-being of my offspring, with my life if necessary, and make me feel guilty as hell if I didn't pander to his every need.

"Oh, dear, didn't Daddy hear you?" Sally crooned.

"What's wrong with him?" I said. What the hell was happening?

"Oh, just neglect, I expect," Sally said airily, "you know, having a father who ignores him and makes him think he's deserted and unloved and all alone in the world when that horrible noise is going on. The usual thing." She turned back to the baby and changed to baby tone. "Didda great big fat-headed nasty pillock not hear you? Is that why your nappy is full and you're starving hungry as well as everything else?"

"You do one end, I'll do the other," I muttered, and we got to work.

So, explain," Sally said later. We had finally got JL2 to calm down and do his well-known impression of a human being

"I will, I will." I slapped the control that would summon Cielito. Nothing happened, so I called Big-O instead.

"Yes, boss?"

"Big-O, get Cielito. I want to know what the hell she was playing at."

"Rightaway, boss." A pause. "Boss, you won't like this."

Big-O wasn't designed to be reticent.

"What is it?" I said quietly.

"Cielito has been scrambled, boss."

Scrambled. The AI equivalent of brain death. Still a presence in the net, still displaying an icon, but otherwise non-functional. Wiped out.

I heard Sally gasp. She knew what that AI meant to me.

"Who by?"

"Pita."

"Right," I said grimly. "Fetch her. I'm coming in."

Pita's icon was before me and Big-O hung in the background.

"I think you ought to know Big-O pulled me away from the games," Pita said. "He was very rude to me."

"Good. Pita, why did you scramble Cielito?"

Silence.

"Well?"

"Who says I did?"

"Big-O?" I said.

"Pita attacked Cielito at 14.37 hours, 22 seconds. boss," Big-O said.

"You see, Pita," I said, "the system logs the activities of all AIs in it at all times. The log cannot be tampered with. Not even I can do that. Now, why did you do it?"

"I don't remember," Pita said quietly.

"Really?"

"You don't believe me, do you? You hate me and you're going to send me away —"

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because everyone else does!" she screamed. If AIs were human she would have bit her tongue and Big-O would have been staring at the ceiling, whistling.

I needed time to think.

"I'm pulling out. Pita, if you step just a little bit out of line again, I'll get a court order and have you scrambled. Got that? And in the meantime, stay away from the other AIs. All of them."

"You hate —"

"Oh, shut up," I snapped.

My mailbox was full of messages about Pita AIs from all around the world. I hadn't revealed my real-life identity, and it showed.

"You got one too? Hoo, boy, get rid of it, quick."

"The Pita series are trouble. Rub it out. I've bagged me three so far."

"There's reports of at least twelve of them..."

"My Pita successfully screwed up a deal I was doing..."

"...scrambled my files..."

"...planted false messages, bust up my marriage. I sat up sharply at the next one."

"...turned off the life support..."

The most informative was:

"...analogous to the viruses of late C20, created just to make trouble and nothing else. PITA = Pain In The Ass. They are extremely capable — perhaps to enable them to ingratiate themselves — and despite their apparent slipshod construction are in fact very high-level. They form attachments to humans of either gender, or even other high-level AIs, who show them kindness, who can be trusted not just to erase them on the quiet, and proceed to screw up their lives. Whoever made them is in A LOT of trouble with the law if caught. Would appreciate details of your experience for the catalogue..."

It left me with a deep, cold fury inside me. Not that Pita lived up to her name. No, no.

Someone had gone to all that trouble. Creating a new mind should be a wonderful thing. But this! It was like having a baby just to abuse it. What kind of sicko out there had done it?

You might as well blame a lion for eating those pretty little animals on the Veldt. Pita followed her nature, and who could blame her? And it had cost me Cielito.

I looked at the messages again. The Pitas would stop at nothing. The broken marriage, the murder (could there be another word?), other examples – all had worked to remove a person or other distraction from the life of the object of their affections. No doubt that was why Pita had scrambled Cielito; she knew that if I was given a choice between looking after JL2 and admiring her instead, JL2 would win every time. She had tried to hurt JL2 and Cielito, brave soul, had tried to stop her.

Plus, removing Cielito would mean one less AI to divert my attention from Pita.

Sally had come up behind me and was reading the messages over my shoulder.

"So now what?" she said. I slid an arm round her.

"I don't know. I really don't know."

I called Big-O.

"Big-O, I want you to find Pita and restrain her. Get in outside help if you need it, and tell me when you've done."

A pleasure, boss."

Pita crashed onto my terminal again. The barriers I had put up would have kept out any other

All knew with the possible exception of Big-O, and Pita just brushed them aside. Don't you hate it when that happens?

"You probably won't care about this, but I'm showing you anyway." Then she was gone again, leaving only a file behind her. I browsed warily through it.

It was a list of results from the tests she had been putting the AIs through. I gave a small moan when I read it.

"The following AIs show management aptitude. Vettis; Sola, Cra/47; Pusho..."

There were AIs with good accountancy skills, in-built or acquired. AIs with engineering backgrounds. Two had worked in hospitals. One was a cordon bleu chef. Pita had sorted them out carefully, graded them and presented this report with an appendix of the tests administered.

Not that I intended to take her word for it straight off, but at first glance I couldn't fault any of it.

Pita was a treasure. I'd never met an AI with so much drive, so much initiative, so much oomph. If only those were her only properties.

Big-O was flashing for attention.

"Yes?"

"Boss, about Pita..."

"Uh huh? She was here just now. I thought I asked you to restrain her."

"Boss, she's in the Playroom and she won't come out. She just pushes me away if I go near her and... well, I remember Cielito, boss."

So, Pita had my best AI by the balls.

"Then call in some heavy stuff, Big-O. I want her tied down."

"I think she'll hurt the others rather than come quietly, boss."

Oh, God.

"What's she doing in the Playroom?"

"Being a pain as usual, boss. She's pushing the others about all the time, won't let them have a moment's rest, and if they complain she says she's doing it for you and they should be grateful."

This had to be it.



"I'm going to get her out of the Playroom, Big-O. The moment she's out I want the Playroom physically disconnected from the rest of the net so she can't get back in. Got that?"

"Got it, boss."

"I'm coming in now."

The situation was deceptively normal. Pita was, sure enough, running the other AIs through their tests... again. They probably thought she was doing it for me.

"Pita," I said, "stop that."

She ignored me. I had a feeling she was withdrawing into a fantasy land where everything happened just as she wanted and any outside stimuli were ignored.

"Pita," I said again, "I told you to stay away from the others."

Pita came over to me slowly.

"I'm just trying to help, Jim, I know you don't think I can but..."

"Pita, you... you're a pain, you're a nuisance, you're an irritation and I've had enough. I want you to consent to surgery now, or else I get a court order. You have a minute to think about it."

I pulled straight out of VR.

I didn't expect her to take it lying down, which was the idea. I sat back and waited, and a few seconds later her words appeared on the monitor.

"WHY WHY I DON'T **UNDERSTAND YOU/E/*### SAY YOU DON'T HATE ME<<\${!(>..."

The message didn't end. It just switched to garbage and poured across the screen.

I switched to voice mode.

"Pita, please get off my monitor."

She did. A moment's pause, and then the lights went off. And on, and off, and on, and off –

Eventually they blew.

"Gloo," I heard JL2 say, enthralled at the entertainment, and it nicely dampened my anger.

"Happy now?" I said. From the kitchen I heard the microwave come on. I walked in and unplugged it.

I began to unplug all the other appliances that were connected to the net as well.

A voice came out of the speakers. It was much calmer now.

"I'm here to stay, Jim, and don't you try and stop me."

"Pita..."

"I'm going to show you that I can manage whether you like it or not. I can run the net for you. You don't need Big-O. I'll scramble him. I can, you know. You've got no gratitude, Jim, but I'm going to show you –"

"Please, Pita," I said, "stop and think. Think about what you're doing."

The network began to go crazy. I could only watch the LEDs and readouts and imagine what it was like in there. At least Big-O had done his job and disconnected the Playroom.

"Pita, you're only hurting yourself. You can't help it, but I can help you if you let me operate. You've been programmed –"

It stopped. I held my breath.

All readouts were green. The monitors were normal. What was happening? The sudden calm was too quiet, too eerie to be a good thing. I went into VR to see.

It was as though a hurricane had passed through. The passageways were distorted, the connections were wrecked. I sought out Big-O, who was trying to restore some sort of order and calm down the AIs who hadn't been in the Playroom.

"Where is she?" I said.

"Gone, and good riddance." Big-O connected to a lesser AI and started sorting out its memory parameters.

"Where to?"

"Into the Net, I think."

I had a nightmare image of Pita out there in the big, wide world, wreaking havoc. A Lawson AI.

"Shit!" I left Big-O in charge and set off into the Net.

I emerged into the Net at speed. As usual it was like a pedestrian trying to cross a motorway, which is why I don't go out often. There were icons in all directions, AIs and humans, going about their business. Pita wasn't in the area.

What to do? I looked hopelessly around me. Why couldn't it be neat and ordered like my own net? But then, Sally did this every day –

Oh, God. I knew where to look.

Sally's icon was waiting for me. She represented herself in the Net with an icon as close to Jessica Rabbit as copyright would allow, and she was tapping her foot.

"This way, Jim."

I followed her through a maze of more wrecked passageways and conduits.

"Pita did all this?" I said weakly. With half my mind I was picturing my credit balance and with the other half comparing it against the damage all around me.

"She had help from our security, trying to stop her. Jim, that AI is a menace. She crashed in on a deal I was doing. It's going to take ages to work up the good will again –"

"Where is she now?"

"– and she trashed our filing. It's on CD up to yesterday, but we've lost a lot of work."

I moaned.

"Where is she now?" I said again.

"We got her subdued. Over here."

Pita had met her match. She was surrounded by the goons owned by the corporation that Sally worked for – big, powerful things several degrees above anything I had at my disposal.

"Jim! Help me!" she called piteously.

I deliberately turned away from her. I faced ruin. I was finished.

"What can we do?" I said hopelessly.

"I don't know," Sally said, just as hopelessly. "At least we've got rid of Pita, one way or the other."

"Mr Lawson?" said a voice behind me. It was an AI with the icon of net security.

"That's me," I said.

"I understand you are responsible for this AI?" it said.

"Unfortunately."

"Then I have to tell you, Mr Lawson, that if the corporation chooses to press charges you could face a maximum fine –"

"Yeah, yeah." I didn't want to hear it. I went over to where Pita was being kept. She saw me coming.

"Oh, Jim, I'm so sorry," she wailed. "Please don't let these things hurt me, Jim, take me back with you, I promise I'll behave, I know you don't hate me really..."

"Shut up, Pita," I said. "All you had to do was agree to surgery, all you had to do, but now I'm ruined and you're either going to agree to be operated on anyway to make you behave like something civilized, or you'll be scrambled by court order."

"You wouldn't let them scramble me," Pita said.

"Surgery?" I said.

"It's not needed, Jim..."

"Surgery?"

"Why can't you trust me..."

"Surgery?"

"You all hate me, you all do..."

"Goodbye, Pita." I turned to the security AI. "She's all yours." To Sally: "See you later, love." I was going to have to go through every penny of our finances and the sooner I started the better.

I heard Pita's calls behind me. "Jim! Jim, please! Please! Jim! I'll do it."

I stopped and turned.

"Jim," Pita said, "if I agree to surgery, will you do it for me? I know you'll be gentle..."

The corporation didn't press charges, thanks to some fancy footwork by Sally, and, because Pita hadn't damaged any public property, all I faced was a mild fine for letting a bad AI out into the Net. And the court let me perform the surgery.

It was a long, long job. Pita's internal structure looked so jumbled, until you began to perceive the immensely complex underlying structure. Her designer was a twisted genius. I had taken notes for designing my own AIs – ones with all the original Pita's abilities and none of the disadvantages.

Finally it was all done. I pulled out of Pita's code and studied her carefully, with Big-O hovering beside me.

"Now, boss?"

"Now, Big-O."

Big-O fired the sequence that would bring Pita back to life and Pita stirred. There was none of the disorientation that an AI usually gets from coming to sentience for the first time, since I had given her back her memories.

"Oh, my!" she said. Then, "I've been very silly, Jim."

"You're better now, Pita," I said.

"I know. Thank you, Jim."

Of course, there was no way of knowing how successful I'd been...

"How do you feel about me?" I said.

"I'll always be fond of you, Jim, I can't help that. But I'm not so... obsessive as I was."

"How do you feel about leaving?"

"If you don't want me to stay I do understand."

It wasn't so much me – it was the other AIs. She had made herself seriously unpopular and AIs don't have the right grasp of repentance and change which is needed to be forgiving.

"No," I said, "it's something you can do for me. I have an idea for a mission –"

I outlined what I had in mind.

"Oh, Jim! That's poetic!"

"Let me know how it goes."

"I will, Jim. Goodbye."

She slipped out into the Net and I never saw her again. I hope she managed. As she said, it was poetic.

The sick bastard who designed the Pitas and inflicted them on the world had hidden his tracks well. It would take an AI of considerable genius to pick up his tracks and find the source... an AI of the Pita series, perhaps.

And what could be more natural than an AI falling in love with its creator? If only I could be there to see it...

Ben Jeapes wrote the enjoyable science-fiction story "Memoirs of a Publisher" (*Interzone* 43), and has had one or two stories published elsewhere. He lives in Abingdon, Oxfordshire.

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Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

Consider these two scenes, both (as it happens) from films that opened in the UK on a single Friday in late 1992

1. A middle-aged Japanese man is having sex with a young woman at gunpoint. The safety catch is off. We see them do it standing, supine, from the rear, and in every shot he runs the loaded weapon over her body, strokes her erect nipple with the barrel, or pushes it into her mouth with his finger in close up tensed against the trigger, while she moans and writhes in all the standard transports of fleshly ecstasy that rising actresses have sooner or later to master. As he ejaculates, the gun goes off and blows a fountainhole in her throat. She falls slowly backwards

2. A high school girl accompanies two men and a teenage hooker to a disused railway carriage, where she is tied up against her will, repeatedly raped, and abandoned. Her father arrives, beats the second girl into a coma and his daughter into terrified submission, forces himself on her sexually while she screams, struggles and weeps, and then coolly and methodically bludgeons her to death, wraps her naked corpse in polythene, and dumps it in a lake.

Yes, well, no points for leaping up with the answers, nor for spying what these bold exemplars of indie entertainment have in common. The first is from Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (of which more in due course), while the second is obvious enough to anyone who had access to a TV set two years ago this season. But I'm not sure the question is simply whether these scenes are words-like "acceptable" or "justified," so much as what their films are entitled to ask us to make of the fact that they're obviously not - with their over-convenient use of this kind of material to threaten, disturb or provoke. Both these movies come from phenomenally gifted and less-of-one visionaries with an amply proven rep for darkness and danger: both are very fine, very strange, very un-American films that make standard Hollywood product look as flat, stiff, rusty and prefab as old Meccano. But both make it increasingly hard to ignore the way their authors have built their mature careers, and much of their



reputation for threat, around the sustained depiction of extreme forms of violence against females. And with these two pictures one comes finally to a kind of a crunch

Three things make David Lynch probably the easier case to deal with. First, his women at least make it reasonably clear they don't enjoy being slapped around and sexually mishandled, and there's not much that could be read as an invitation to the viewer to enjoy watching it. Second, the reason his recent oeuvre has been bulging to the point of self-parody with plotlines of sustained male sadism against women is that Lynch is sincerely preoccupied with the exploration of evil, and this is one of the few kinds of extreme bad behaviour that basically-nice emeritus Eagle Scouts from Missoula find it reasonably easy to picture. And third, he's clearly less interested in the exercise of violence than in the threat of it - and particularly in the effect of that threat on women who are terrorized and trapped by appalling men in long-term abusive relationships. To make that threat mean anything, it's necessary now and again to show in memorably bilious detail what it really involves, but I don't think anyone would dispute that one of the things that make the best

Lynch great is much less the individual moments of shock than the the penumbra of depth and darkness he paints around them. The problem with Lynch's treatment of women is the way they so often seem segregated and polarized into good girls and bad virgins and tramps, madonnas and whores. Laura Derns and Isabella Rossellinis, goody-goody Donna Hayward and double-damned Laura Palmer. It's not just all the women, of course, and it's not their problem alone.

One of the things that eventually dismantled the viability of *Twin Peaks* the show was its progressive sorting of all its initially-ambivalent characters of either sex into white souls and black in a war between absolute good and evil, part of the series' long descent from complexity and ambiguity into something more recognizably like television. But it's disappointing that *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* can throw off the shackles of format in so many other respects yet still refuse either of its female leads a step over the categorical borderline. When we first meet Laura, she's already gone terminally to the bad; her spiritual makeover from the homecoming queen of the familiar end-credits photo into the linesnorting, fleshpeddling lost soul of her final days is already complete by

the time the movie opens, whereas the one time Donna tries to shadow her all the way she has to be spirited out and memory-wiped the moment some guy in a check shirt gets her bra off. The idea that a Laura or Shelley or Josie or that blonde with the big house in series two might ever have been other than a victim is one that both series and movie acknowledge only in theory: and the film's bitterly meaningless dream-happy ending leaves it cruelly in question whether Laura has finally escaped, triumphed, found peace or seen salvation in any respect whatever.

These iffinesses apart, the miserable reception given the *Twin Peaks* movie overseas does make one wonder what show all those people were watching in the first place. It's true that most of the sprawling cast and sillier subplots have been dropped, including all Hornes, Martells, Packards, and the entire Sheriff's office, with even the survivors reduced to virtual cameos; so I suppose if the bits that kept you glued happened to be the ongoing subtextual K/S routines between Harry and Coop then you might indeed feel like counting your change. But against that we have more than ever before of those offwall amateur semioticians from the FBI and their allowance of party quirks, while it's fairly clear from what happens to the familiar faces left behind in *Twin Peaks* itself that the shift of spotlight to new or irregular players was really the only feasible way to play.

As author, Lynch is a lot stronger on inventing characters than at sustaining or developing them, and even the roomful of writers who took over the job in the production-line phase of the series had trouble preserving the edge for long against the crumble into camp. The film's at its feeblest precisely in the mercifully rare moments when it tries to reproduce the TV characters: Bobby being bad boy and James being troubled and innocent, horrid Leo ordering hapless Shelley to scrub the floor, and the occasional unhappy scrap of low grade network-speak relationship-in-a soundbite dialogue ("I do love you, Donna, but I don't want you to be like me," &c.). Compared with the relaxed, funny double act of new Feds Isaak and Sutherland in the prologue, even dependable old favourites like MacLachlan and Ray Wise seem awkward, misplaced, and only intermittently convincing. And the prequel option not only allows the tone and characterizations to be reset to the values of the pilot episode, but resists all the things that television does better (relentless story progression, large casts, complex multiple narrative lines, strong alternations of mood) to visit the heart of the mythos where television could never have gone.

Anyone seriously concerned about what happens after the end-of-run cliffhanger does get at least an answer of sorts to the final teaser (the nasty conclusion apparently being that at time of flashback Annie is not at all well); and what the prequel does do superbly well for the work as a whole is to turn the seemingly unplayable character of Laura Palmer herself into a complete, intricate, and absolutely moving embodiment of the myth. Nothing in Sheryl Lee's thankless earlier roles of stiff, good fairy, and poorly-written lookalike gave any hint of her power to carry a movie like this, and yet she not only turns in the strongest performance Lynch has ever directed but pretty much crowds all rival players off the screen. If the ropey metaphysical apparatus of Bob, the Lodge, and the Red Room with its Pilsner-pulling denizens is all wearing decidedly thin by this stage, the film still stands as one of the most vivid evocations on screen of the utter tooth-pulling horror of adolescence, irrespective of whether your old man additionally happens to be a homicidal child-abusing psycho possessed by an ancient evil from the Pacific wild-woods. The scenes that haunt from *Twin Peaks* the movie aren't so much the splashes of sexuality, savagery and silliness that couldn't be done on network TV, but the little scenes of everyday nightmare: the row at the family dinner-table, the bad day in school, Laura's uncontrollable tears at the Julee Cruise song in the road-house. It may not be much like the film the unwary expected, but I can't see how lovers of either *Wild at Heart* or the finest use found for a cathode-ray tube in our adult lifetimes could seriously find ground for complaint.

Tetsuo II, a different kind of indie-bred non-sequel to a famous and gleefully disturbed auteurial oddity, has to find excuses of a different sort. By the standards of the original 16mm b&w *Tetsuo*, this professional retread seems comparatively sane and responsible, at least to the degree that it allows such radical compromises with commercial film form as dialogue, continuity and something that for much of the picture could charitably pass for a plot. Even the sexual aggression itself has been tastefully toned down, though given that the original included a woman literally screwed to death by a giant rotating-bladed steel phallus the notion of tastefulness here is altogether relative. In context, the gun-sex episode is at least at the heart of the plot, being the severely primal scene witnessed by the hero in childhood and subsequently blanked out, together with its immediate sequel in which he uses the powers bred in him by his gun-crazy mad-scientist dad to blow both parents to shrapnel flesh with a cannon extruded from his chest.

Henceforward, at least till the day his similarly-endowed long-lost kid brother takes him out to jog his memory, he buries his true nature in a mild-mannered Bruce Banner type who merely transforms into a phallic sex mutant when he gets severely cheeched off. Whether this inspired nonsense actually warrants some of the stuff we see on screen is another matter. I suppose Tsukamoto's defence case would have to be that One, there is a deep and ancient tradition of extreme sexual violence in the manga tradition the *Tetsuo* films acknowledge and invoke, and Two, *Body Hammer* is at least laying claim to say something ironic, satiric, and dangerous about the Japanese nukular family. Whereas the anonymous hero of the first film was a bachelor salaryman with an independent girlfriend and his antagonist a punky metal fetishist, in II the same actors (Tomoroh Taguchi and the director) play a happily-married businessman dad and his unsuspected orphan baby brother. Indeed it's precisely through repeated threats to his wife and kid, involving a rather tiring chain of kidnaps and rooftop chases, that Taguchi's character is provoked into pumping iron till his pump does indeed turn to iron - whereupon he can graduate to take his rightful place in the community of homoerotic cyborg samurai mutants with chest-bursting whanger guns that make any kind of familial bonding other than skullpopping duels to the death in underground scrapyards a largely redundant lifestyle decision.

There's no denying this *Tetsuo* comes together a lot better than its predecessor, with more ideas, more tricks, more narrative, and the same headbuzzing directorial technique let loose on a proper film budget. Relentless use of sound, strange flashes of random cut-in images, and a camera technique not so much handheld as clenched maniacally between the teeth provide the ideal accompaniment to lines like "Now, this bullet will corrode you to death!" and enthusiastic comparisons of something the subtitles call "magnitude of killing intention," not to mention an appealing vision of the Tokyo underworld as entirely populated by would-be black guys with thrusting haircuts working out on metal apparatus in hangars full of heavy plant. And as confirmation of its manganaui author's deepening political maturity and vision, the heroine has now graduated from bloody sex-torture fatality to the liberated, forward-looking 90s role of passive object of jeopardy who gets cuffed to a water pipe while the men who would possess her go through a bonding ritual of shooting it out in a symbolic exchange of full metal jackoff. Well, stone me, girls, who'd have thought we'd've come so far.

(Nick Lowe)

Remember Me

Elizabeth Counihan

When I woke up I thought I was lying under the branches of a dead forest, until I saw that what arched above me were the bones of the Great Builder herself and I knew that everything was over, just as the Yag had foretold. Beside me lay my beloved wife, holding the last of our hatchlings in her arms; but I could not awaken her nor any of our children. I stayed with them for two days without once seeing the sun which might have brought them to life. The sky is covered by a grey fog, and I have seen snow fall twice. The once silver scales on my hands are black with the cold; my fingers are numb. This cannot be Spring. I have found a fur coat, made from the pelts of the Eggstealers. It is the one my grandmother wore only for ceremonies; but I saw living Eggstealers today. If hairy skin protects these foul creatures from the ice, then I will live as they do.

I have climbed all over our home. There is no-one left. All the nests have fallen and the lake is trickling away through the disintegrating dam. Huge icicles have replaced our waterfall. I am the last one, the last of the People of the Rainbow.

I took my horn, made from the Builder's tooth, and came down to the icy shore to call you, O Sabrinas, to see if you would still come to the music of my People. And you have come, hundreds of you, more than I have ever seen before, floating on the sea, sitting on the rocks, looking at me with your great eyes. Your tails beat to the rhythm of my music. Do you understand my words?

I shall sing you a Last Song – the story of the Builder and the People of the Rainbow. I have won the Singers' Contest – no one has ever seen so many of you. My music has called you, but it is a hollow victory.

There is no Rainbow now, but when the sun shone on the waterfall cascading from the Builder's dam you could see how we got our name. I was once told that our ancient ancestors believed that the Builder had made us too, but few thought that in my day. We built our nests in her dam, and in return we helped her repair it and decorate it in preparation for her mates.

What can I say about her whose huge bones lie across the mighty trees and branches of the dam? I thought she could never die. She was the greatest of all beasts; one of her feet could have crushed us all, as we crush the ants to eat their honey; but our children played on her back, sliding down her hilly sides. The bards sang in praise of her shining scales as bright as our rainbow; her mighty teeth, which could fell trees as tall as herself; her enormous bellow which deafened us, but brought her mates thundering from

the forests. Because of her our lake was always full, even in the driest season. Our boats came home brimming with fish – boats made from her discarded eggshells.

One summer some Firebreathers flew very near to the dam. The forest around us burned, and we choked with smoke. For once we forgot our rivalry with the Lake People and all of us huddled on their flat rafts in the middle of the lake. At last the Builder was roused to anger, when the male Firebreathers, in order to impress their mates, competed to cause the greatest possible devastation and approached the dam itself. She rose up from her sleep and bellowed so that the hills shook. Some of the Firebreathers took to the air in fright, but the two nearest her, who had burnt equally large circles of charcoal under the eye of a bright-eyed young female, continued their folly. The Builder slowly turned her back on them and flattened them with a sweep of her tail, then returned to her slumber. Days later their spreadeagled forms could still be seen etched into the earth. There were no more forest fires near us that year.

Is it any wonder that we honoured such a marvellous beast, that we used our precious ancestral gold to adorn her great bower? The Lake People wanted our gold for Trade, the Yags used it for Discovery. They had no love of the gold's beauty. We could not understand their desires, nor they ours. So many of our ancient songs tell of their attempts to steal it from us, but you, of course, have heard them many times at the singing contests with the Lake People. You must know all our heroic tales, and theirs too – those few of you who took an interest in their singing.

I will tell you instead of my friendship with Hern of the Lakemen and how I met Melusin, my beloved. It will be a song of praise and sorrow for the dead, and of sorrow for myself, the Last Singer.

When we were children we rode on the biggest of the dragonflies as they droned up and down the lakeside. You must think of us, golden-scaled and laughing, clinging to our snapping, dangerous steeds – my brother Huon lost two fingers on such a flight, but thought nothing of it although our mother wept.

One day I captured a giant. I dropped from the dam onto his back as he stooped to catch one of the fish leaping into the waterfall. His wings made enough noise to rival the roar of the Tyrant Beast, and when I mounted him he took me into the sky, far above my playfellows. In vain he tried to shake me off, for I had

my legs clamped firmly around his slender middle. He made great swoops and dives up and down the lake, so that sometimes I saw the sun purple through his translucent wings as he turned upside down. At last he took me on a wonderful flight to the other end of the lake. Behind me was the Rainbow and the Builder (asleep as usual), my excited friends and worried parents; on each side the forested, cave-pocked hills, streaked by waterfalls and rivers; ahead was the town of the Lake People, a town of rafts and huts. They were all small and insignificant to me; it did not occur to me that to fall from such a height could be fatal. For a few moments I shared the sky with two inquisitive Yagmutes who flapped beside me on blue and green wings, but they flew off in foolish terror when I screamed at them.

As we approached the town I crowed with delight, waving my arms and shouting childish abuse at our ancient enemies. But one of the Lakemen took aim. I saw him lifting his bow but could not hear the arrow whistle and thud as it hit my dragonfly because of the sound of his wings. It was a master shot, penetrating my steed's armour. The sound spiralled downwards and so did we. I jumped from his back just before we crashed buzzing into the water.

An instant before impact I remembered the distance I had fallen and shut my eyes. When I opened them I could see dark shapes moving in a mote-filled light, and far away a huge eye gazing at me. Just as I became convinced that I had died, and that the eye belonged to the Builder of Builders herself, I felt myself pulled violently away. The light became red, I was thrashing and coughing, trying to remember how to breathe, and fighting to clear my face of what I took to be waterweed. A deep voice spoke in thick, unfamiliar accents.

"It's not a Yag, then. What else rides the air?"

"Cut it free, since I troubled to aim only at the fly." This was a lighter, younger voice.

Someone cut the net, and I tried to stand, but groaned as my body reminded me of what I had done to it. I looked around at the tall Lakemen, all laughing.

"It's one of the Goldmakers from the dam. I didn't realize they were so small!"

"It's a hatchling. They're always that colour at first."

I got to my feet in order to tell them that I was almost fully grown and certainly bore no resemblance to a Yag, but my legs gave way and I sat down with a thud.

"Now, all of you, leave him be. He's my prisoner, and I'll not have him frightened."

I looked up at the owner of the voice, identifying him as the younger of the two persons I had heard speaking earlier.

"I am not afraid of Lakepeople!" I said as contemptuously as possible, although in fact I was so much in awe of their yellow eyes and the horns on their foreheads that I could not stop trembling.

The young Lakeman smiled at me and saluted. He spoke loudly, as if to make sure I understood him.

"That was a brave flight, Goldmaker, and I'm sorry I ended it, but we do not allow uninvited strangers here. You must be most uncomfortable after such an awkward fall, and I'm afraid your gallant Fly is dead."

I replied haughtily, aware that the Lakermen were still laughing, but he pulled me to my feet, and insisted that I was feasted at his family house as an honoured guest. And so it was that Hern and I became



Illustration by Deirdre Connellan

friends. Even at that time he was famous for his marksmanship, although only a year or two older than myself. He was impressed by my daring and I by his skill. Rivalry over gold made friendship a rarity between members of our two races in those days, although it was said that in ancient times we had been one people, hatched from the Third Great Egg.

We did not meet often, for the Lakernen were great traders as well as huntsmen, and he was often away in the unknown lands beyond our valley. I meantime, learned my own kind of hunting – searching for gold in the secret places known only to the Rainbow People; and from the bards I learned to sing the Contest Songs. My friend was not a good singer.

It was not for another two years that Hern became recognized as a hero by all the lakeside dwellers. There was excitement among all of us as we approached the time of the Great Dance of the Builder and her mates. This event, occurring every five years, was heralded by numerous feasts, entertainments and chases and, of course, the Prize Singing. You, the Sabrinas, were to be our listeners and by your numbers, our judges (as you now hear and judge my Last Song).

Hern invited me to go hunting.

I travelled along the shore by night so as to arrive at the town in time for the dawn meet. We of the Rainbow People are not great hunters by nature and, like you, live mostly on eggs and fish. I was enthralled by the prospect of adventure and glory. I waved my arms towards the moon and admired the glitter of my new silver skin. I was a raptor as swift and ferocious as a Tyrant Beast, ready to face anything. But the next moment I had become the acolyte of a goddess.

She rose from the lake and shook herself in a shower of pearls and diamonds; her face and hands were illuminated by the light of the glowshells caught in her silver net. As I have told her many times, I was quite prepared to fall on my knees, but she laughed and jumped ashore swinging the net, and I recognized her for one of the Lakewomen, smaller and more delicately made than the rest, but even so as tall as I was. She has told me since that she took me for a will'o-the-wisp, a portent of luck in love and so, I hope, I was for her.

She was Melusin, daughter of the Lake King and cousin to Hern. She had returned to her town for the celebrations after staying for two years with her mother's people over the hills. Each of us was drawn to the mystery of the other. I sang her the Ballad of the Smith (who was taken by the Yags) and she sang The Song of the Great Beasts (Three Horn who fights the Tyrant, the Plated Burrower whose pronged tail kills the hunter and greatest of all, the Builder who made the Lake). We laughed at the chorus of frogs who accompanied our singing. When the rising sun awoke the Rainbow, we were certain that it would take at least two lifetimes to learn everything about each other, and that only death could part us. Too soon we heard the sound of horns and knew that we must hurry to join the chase.

We were to hunt Buglebeasts. You may never have seen them as they do not graze near the ocean, but you must have heard their hooting alarm calls. They are docile enough, but very alert, with a superb look-out system. Well, you will never see them now, nor

hear them again. I think that they and all the great beasts are gone forever. Perhaps only you and I are left to understand this world now.

There were about twenty hunters, but I was the only representative of the Rainbow People. The plan was to capture one of the beasts, as Hern had learned that they were used as pack animals by some tribes. He planned to stupefy it with darts tipped with a certain herb and in this way to lead it into captivity.

We set off towards the hills, our knees brushed by the dew-covered grass. We moved more quietly as soon as we were in range of the animals, although we could see them all the way from the lake because of their vast size. Their look-outs lifted their sinuous necks to glance at us as we passed but immediately returned to their grazing. To them only large creatures appear dangerous, and here was our advantage. Hern pointed out a relatively small female and we closed in on her. When the little darts flew into her side she flicked her head a few times, but had devoured the foliage from a huge tree-branch before her neck sagged.

Melusin and I went forward with ropes, our idea being to mount the tail ridges – something I had frequently done when playing on the back of our Builder. At that moment we heard the high alarm call of the other Buglers and then the most feared of all sounds, a brazen pitiless roar. We threw ourselves to the ground, which shook at the crash of the drugged Bugler. There was a stench of blood and decay. I looked up and the Tyrant Beast squatted above us, his teeth a red and white army, his mad eyes freezing us; his jaws already dripped with the blood of our quarry. Suddenly he reared up into the sky. It was as if a mountain had erupted and we were falling down it. Roaring again, he tossed his head, scattering a halo of flying Leatherwings, and pawed at his eye with his ridiculously small forelegs. Melusin dragged me out of his shadow before his lashing tail could crush us. Somewhere in the cacophony of rage and pain we heard Hern's victory cry and when we turned the blinded Tyrant, bristling with spears and arrows, was the victim. He stood on his hind legs clutching his head in agony and when he fell the sun shone again. We scrambled out of the pit that he had made and the shrieking Leatherwings descended to gorge on his corpse.

Hern's victory feast and my wedding to the fair Melusin coincided with the time of the Builder's Dance. Perhaps the frantic noise of our battle had awoken her, for it was on the same day that she arose in all her stupendous glory and ambled mountainously to the water's edge. There she bellowed more loudly than the Tyrant Beast. The herds fled; flocks of Leatherwings flew up from every tree; fish scurried into the depths. We heard her from the end of the lake and all the Townspeople ran along the shore to watch. My own people, knowing what was to come, were collecting their belongings and quitting the dam, after adding one or two final touches to the golden decorations. The Builder snorted; two small children, blown over as if by a hurricane, were rescued by their parents. She raised her head and her eyes shone more brilliantly than our jewels. Her step became more lively; she almost pranced along the

shore. Each footstep made a paddling pool for the children.

Later that afternoon we heard the first answering bellow. Someone shouted and pointed northwards. A small avalanche could be seen parting the trees on the hillside. Shortly afterwards we saw another, accompanied by the distant sound of falling trees and a flurry of Leatherwings. As her two suitors approached their excited calls echoed from the mountainsides. By this time almost the entire population of the Dam and the Laketown were lying flat on the ground with covered ears. Our Builder was splashing at the water's edge now, drenching the three inquisitive Yagmatae who had flown down to watch.

The males charged towards us, imposingly huge, but not as large as the Builder herself. They were heralded by several more Yagmatae, who have all the curiosity but none of the intelligence of their wives, the Yags. The Builders now began a chorus of joyful singing and dancing. I had always thought that the end of the world would sound like that, but now of course, I know that the world ends in silence.

One enormous wave and two large splashes flooded the shore as the lovers entered the water. We had all retreated to higher ground to watch; not that we could see very clearly through the curtains of spray coming from the lake. We glimpsed their iridescent tails through the fountains and whirlpools they made as they slapped and heaved the water. At last there was peace as they dived below the surface.

"Very quiet this time," said my grandmother. "Only two males – not like the old days."

After the mating came a series of feasts as we waited for our Builder to produce her clutch of eggs under the dam. The first was held at the Laketown in honour of Hern. I and several of my kin were present – the first time in living memory that the two tribes had sat down together around the fire. The head of the Tyrant Beast was much too large to produce as a trophy, but Hern and his friends had managed to extract several teeth. My cousin Nimu promised to carve the whole story of Hern's battle onto one of them. I sang in his honour and Melusin's. The Lakepeople joined in the choruses, although they were as usual out of tune, as you will have noticed. My family and Melusin's conferred and bargained. Our Elders shook their heads, saying: "Their children will be too clumsy to work the gold, and they will have horns!"

To which the Lake King replied: "And they will be great fishers who will teach your people to sing." But after many hours of argument, accompanied by the best food and drink our Lake could provide, the match was agreed.

We were married two days later at a feast given by my people. The ceremony was performed by the Lake King and my Grandmother, who was Chief of the Council that year. She was very displeased at having to present him with a bride price of a gold chain, but most of us were happy to drink the wonderful wine he had brought in large quantities from across the hills.

Towards evening, as the songs became louder, and the children drowsed at our feet, and Melusin and I were ready to follow the retreating butterflies into the shadow of the hills, a sudden commotion made us look upwards, and there, hung in the sky, was a basket

suspended from a fiery cloud. The noise (shrieks and curses) came from a dark figure jumping up and down and apparently trying to beat the fire with a bundle of twigs. But all in vain; the flames devoured the floating cloud and the basket crashed hissing into the lake.

"It's a Yag!" someone shouted. There was more splashing as people pelted her with stones and then, thinking better of it, pulled her dripping from the water.

To think that the Builder of Builders ever allowed such a creature to hatch from an egg. No living thing is uglier than a Yag, and seeing this one I could well believe that the invincible stupidity of the male Yags was a necessity for the survival of the race. She was a ridiculous sight, cloaked in her useless wings, her wrinkled green hand fiddling with a metal device attached to her pointed head. She was grumbling to herself.

"Have you come to steal our gold, or to spy on us?" cried my brother, Huon Eightfingers. "Stop muttering spells to curse us all."

"I am speaking to my sisters using a crystalline communicator – the water is causing a malfunction. Your crude sing-song language does not contain the words to explain how it works."

To our amazement she removed the pointed top section, revealing a straggle of grey hair, such as the Eggstealers have, covering her head. After shaking the water from the hat, she replaced it and resumed her muttering, twisting the metal prong on top, but after a few moments she sneezed and spoke to us again.

"I come in peace!" she announced

"Go back to the peaks, Yag," said my grandmother. "You can't have our gold. We remember the sufferings of our ancestor at your hands. Fly away on your fire cloud, or call a Yagmate to carry you, since your own wings cannot."

"I have not come to borrow another smith from you nor for your gold, although you waste it on trinkets instead of using it for Discovery. I come to warn you. Doom is coming! The end of everything!"

How foolishly we jeered! The Yag stamped angrily.

"How many males came down from the hills to your Builder's mating dance this year – only two? And you Lakemen, trading from valley to valley, have you not seen how the forests are burned by the Firebreathers and do not return? We, the Discoverers, sailing the air in our balloons, gazing at the horizons with our far-seeing glasses, we know what is to come. How can you waste your time on foolishness in these days of doom? You have some degree of intelligence – unlike those great brutes you love so much. The sun will be blotted out and the earth will wither. Your feast is a wake. Do not mock my Extrapolation because my voice is not fitted to the chant of your tongue."

"What nonsense you speak, Yag!" The yellow-eyed Lake King had risen to his feet. "It is known that for many years the summers have been long and the winters mild. The sun shines brightly. We Lakemen have no quarrel with the Yags. Sit with us and drink to the future."

She paddled over to dry herself by the fire and drink the Lakemen's wine, but was soon declaiming again in a slurred voice.

"I am Cass – Discoverer, Explorer and Extrapolator! Behold! After the heat will come the cold! Across the

sea in a distant land huger beasts than your Dam Maker cause great detonations by the gas of their bodies. Others are burrowing into the depths of the earth and, in their ignorance, accumulating rare ores which, when gathered together, will rend the very fabric of nature. With their cataclysmic deaths these creatures will kill millions of others and the clouds from these explosions will rain down on the whole world, poisoning yet more. Even now we see dying forests and with them the Great Beasts are also dying. Our Earth has gone mad; soon the children of her insane invention will kill her. There is no future!"

She stumbled and sat down heavily – (Yags have no head for strong drink). There was much laughter and ironic cheering. Soon everyone was singing again as the Yag snored by the fire. I turned to Melusin, expecting to see her laughing with the rest, but her face was forlorn.

"That absurd creature has upset you!" I said angrily. "Everyone knows that Yags are always thinking up silly ideas. They spend their lives peering into the past and the future, but they can't make music, or find gold. They don't even know how to work metal unless we show them. No-one takes them seriously!"

"But perhaps they know the future because they study it. If she's right we'll be swept away into nothing – forgotten."

I tried to comfort her.

"How could such a thing happen! Our Builder will live forever and our children's children will sing at her Mating Dance. The Great Beasts can never die."

"And if they do," she said sadly, "their huge bones will lie in the earth as a testament. If thinking beings arise from the Earth again, they will see the bones and wonder that such creatures once lived. But who will remember us, whose bones will fall into dust?"

This time I took her in my arms and drew her into the shadows, where for that time we forgot all our fears.

It has happened now. Perhaps it was for the best that we ignored the Yag. We could have done nothing to change things, and I had all those happy years with Melusin. We saw the Builder's eggs incubating beneath the dam and the two gawky hatchlings swimming up to life. By the time they were old enough to waddle off into the hills in search of rivers of their own, we had four hatchlings ourselves; tall and golden with the strength of the Lakemen and the voice of my people. The winters were so mild that we hardly slept through them – until the great cloud came, and the great freeze. And so we went into our winter nests, curling up, each family to its own place in the dam. We kissed each other goodnight until the Spring, but the Spring did not come again.

Why do I live when all the rest have died? I have seen no Yags flying the sky with cauldrons bubbling, belabouring their foolish mates with sticks as they try to persuade them to tow those clumsy balloons in the right direction. Surely they, the Wiseones, who call themselves the Discoverers, and who foresaw the Great Freeze, have found some means of surviving it? There is no Laketown now, no hunt, no beasts to hunt. The ice has killed the dragonflies and butterflies. A few small flying and scurrying creatures survive – and the furred Eggstealers – but in all the days since I awoke I have seen nothing larger than myself.

Only I am left of the speaking creatures – Obron the Singer – and you, Beautiful Sabrinas. You sit on the rocks, combing your long hair, decorating it with shells, nourishing your young with the juice of your own bodies and listening. How strange you are and how wonderful! Perhaps you think and understand, although you do not speak.

I am the end of a story. Perhaps if I go up into the hills I shall find others like me, a few scattered survivors. But you are the future. One day your children will inherit this forsaken Earth.

Remember me.

Elizabeth Counihan is editor of the small-press fantasy magazine *Scheherazade* (for which her sister, illustrator Deirdre Counihan, is art editor). The above is her first story to appear in *Interzone*. She lives and works in East Grinstead, Surrey.

Brian Stableford (see his story, pages 44-56) is author of the metaphysical fantasy trilogy consisting of *The Werewolves of London* (1990; praised by John Clute in these pages), *The Angel of Pain* (1991) and *The Carnival of Destruction* (date to be announced). His 1992 novel was the vampire tale *Young Blood* (Simon & Schuster). He is a copious writer of non-fiction as well as fiction, and occasionally uses the pseudonym "Brian Craig." Author of numerous stories for this magazine (the last one was "The Unluckiest Thief," issue 60), he lives in Reading, Berkshire.

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A Master of the Alien

Liz Holliday talks to Phillip Mann

It sounds like an aspiring writer's dream come true: send a novel manuscript you'd almost forgotten to Gollancz and get a phone call saying they'd like to publish it in fairly short order. Of course, it wasn't quite that easy, but that's more or less how it happened for Philip Mann. "It was a scruffy old thing," he told me when I met him at the Gollancz offices recently though he did go on to emphasize that he now knows how to present a manuscript properly, and that he isn't actually suggesting that people send in manuscripts in poor condition. If anything, he says, it shows Gollancz up in a brilliant light for even having bothered to read it.

The story, of course, started much earlier than that, and included a period when he had stopped reading science fiction altogether.

Mann grew up in Yorkshire, but he now lives in New Zealand where he works in the theatre as an actor and director, though he has wide ranging interests. He attributes that strongly to his upbringing: "My father was killed before I was born. He was killed in the war, and the result was that I was brought up by my mother on her own. There was no such thing as a single parent then, she was a widow. And one of the lovely things my mother did was she filled the house with books. If I have anything to look back on it's that I thank the Lord for the free lending library, Brilliant. So, there we were up in Scarborough, a very poor family, but surrounded with books of all kinds. Everything from the plays of Aristophanes to books on prehistoric monsters to science-fiction novels to... I don't know, she just filled the house with the most extraordinary range of books. She was a great reader still is, and I was a very early reader, a voracious reader. I'd read anything. I was totally undiscriminating. If I got bored I'd put it to one side. I know that a lot of that early reading comes through into my own writing. Certain authors became very important to me. For instance, I got a great love of reading Dickens, and later on Jane Austen I also used to read the Bible a lot.

"I remember being 13 or 14 and suddenly realizing that I could read Shakespeare. What I mean is, I'd never thought of it before of course I could

read him - but suddenly it hit me with immense force, the wonderment that this was English. I began reading Shakespeare and just loving it. And of course as an actor I've worked on his texts, and I just know that I got this tremendous love of words from then. At the same time I was discovering poetry. I was reading Shelley, Keats, the great poets. A seminal work for me was *Moby Dick*. I would regard Herman Melville as being the greatest prose writer I've ever encountered. I think Melville lies behind quite a bit of what I do. I love the scale of it, the bigness of mind, the wonderful way he handles language. These are all the other sources which come flooding through.

"When I went to university I did a degree in English and Drama, so I was able to read as much English literature as I wanted; but I mean I'll still go back now and read I re-read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* recently for a book I'm working on - but also I'm quite happy to go back and re-read Chaucer. I studied Old English for a period. I had a great liking for 18th-century poets, like Swift. I used to read these things for joy, really. I think they all help and filter through to my work."

Unsurprisingly, one of the things he read a good deal of was science fiction. Yet it didn't last: "I had been reading a lot of it and I must have been very unlucky. I can't remember what I was reading but I remember being really quite fed up. Books that left me feeling really good and excited I just didn't seem to be reading. I'm sure they were about but I wasn't reading them I more or less stopped, and that was about the same time that I began to do a lot more writing myself, so there was a kind of transference over, really."

Later he added: "Stopping reading science fiction was almost a conscious act. I read one book I can't remember what it was - it was full of the most gratuitous killing of an alien creature. I remember being struck by the paradox that if you are supporting one kind of life, you can't go taking other kinds of life. It's a paradox which is on-going. It's interesting, because I think that's the thing I started to look at in my first book. Obviously, there was a kind of question being posed,

and I just didn't like the idea of inventing life forms in order to knock 'em off."

Eventually Mann did get back to sf, but it took some persuasion by a friend before he sent the battered manuscript of *The Eye of the Queen* (1982) to Gollancz. Like so much of Mann's work, it included some very strange yet convincing aliens and the question of how we might communicate with beings so unlike ourselves. "When I was a kid I was very interested in science and such. I spent a lot of my time down at rock-pools and things studying life-forms. I've always been interested in biology. In fact, I think if I hadn't decided to go into the theatre, I would have been very happy as a marine biologist. I still keep up my reading in botany and biology. I wasn't too bad at maths either, so I had the possibility of a career in the sciences, if I'd wanted to. I'm a lover of plants. I'm a very keen gardener, I love growing things. And I think that's where this interest in aliens comes from. Although I would say that all my aliens have very comprehensible emotions. I mean, you can understand them quite well even if they are alien. They adopt rather strange perspectives on human affairs.

"I tend to believe that it's through the arts that we will be able to communicate with alien beings. If there's some object which I think is beautiful and they can perceive the beauty in it too, there's a link. Mathematics is probably a basic line of communication, but thereafter other arts will be a significant area we share in common. They are a very good description of our sensibilities, particularly visual arts and music. So I look forward to the day we do meet up with the aliens, and I want to see what kind of arts they've got, because that would tell me about them, tell me what they're like."

I was sure Mann was going to tell me he did masses of research to develop the aliens in his novels. I was wrong. "I do drawings of them, though I'm not an artist. Something more important is that there's a certain logic. Once you make assumptions about them a certain logic just follows. But as I write, the writing is discovery. By writing I find out what I'm writing about. I very often don't know until I've actually written the thing and I go, 'Ooh, that's what I meant.' It's a very odd process.

"I just make it all up. When I talk about the logic, when it's something like the Pe'Ellans, as I came to write about them they have this funny mottled skin, this patterned skin. Now, for them the external was what gave meaning; whereas we think the opposite. We think the external is all superficial. We want the inner meaning. For them, the external is the meaning. Now, that's an interesting concept: what does that mean? Well, one reason is that the plates of their skin describe their moral being as they are moving towards creative perfection. That's what Winter Wind wants.

"A second thing is that old life is what is revered rather than young life. There's a shocking moment in the book where one of the elders is playing with a child, throws the child up and breaks his back on a branch. It lays the body out on the bank and goes back to playing. And again, what a contrast. They eat their own eggs for Christ's sake. So they are very different from us, but once you've got that, what's the logic of it? And I just confront that.

"But I have to tell you that I visualize things very strongly, and I hear them very strongly. So, once something is happening in a book it starts to take off. It's not like listening to dictation, but it's not too far from that. But if something goes wrong and I change it, it's as if I've just swapped reels. Everything changes for me. I just start off again. And it's always been like that for me. I didn't know I wrote like that until I came to write *Eye of the Queen*.

"I'd be sitting there writing and looking across over here, to access it. I sort of see it all. I think because of my training in the theatre I tend to look at those times when emotional issues come to the fore and people clash with one another. One of the best clashes of all, of course, is between a human and an alien when you're grappling to understand what the hell they're on about – or grappling to understand what the hell they think you're on about."

Unlike some writers who plan a book down to the last detail before they write a word, Mann favours a fairly easy-going approach to starting a new book: "I'm very much an improviser. I always know the big shape of a novel. I don't know the detail. I don't know quite how I'm going to get to that end. I liken it sometimes to rowing backwards. You know how it is when you row out to sea and you know where the land is. You push your boat out, but you can't see much. As I row, as I write, I discover things. But there comes a point in a novel where – still with the idea of rowing – you can actually stop, and see clearly where you are going. That's a key moment, because then I do all my planning, and I know exactly how I want things to fall out, to work through to the end.



Phillip Mann

Then I plan quite carefully, because then I need to get the ending just exactly the way it should be. Usually it's about half way or just beyond – about two-thirds of the way through where you know exactly – or I do anyway – where you are going. Threads start to pull together and issues become clearer. But I emphasize I do know the big shape from the beginning, and I don't just go in blind. I do know what I'm doing – like, in *Wulfsyarn* I knew exactly what the ending was; but I didn't know how to get there."

Wulf, the robotic autscribe in *Wulfsyarn* (1990), might be considered another kind of alien: "His understanding is very great on one level, but it's a machine understanding on another. He knows a lot about history, but does not and cannot think like a human being. So as the reader – the human being reading it – you'll at various times think, 'Wulf, you have not

quite got it right; you've got it practically right but you don't understand it.' But you as a human being, do. And that means that because Wulf is more restrained, hopefully the impact of the novel is even greater."

The scope of Mann's other books – *Master of Paxwax* (1986) and *The Fall of the Families* (1987) – is larger. "I wanted to write a galaxy-wide book. When I was writing to my then editor Malcolm Edwards, I said to him, 'I want this book to be like a beautifully brilliant coloured carpet. I want the reader to be pushing the carpet out in front of them. I want all the bright colours and clashes and so forth.' So I regard *Master of Paxwax* and *The Fall of the Families* as being extravagant works of the imagination. I loved writing them. I did really, because I could have all the alien creatures and I had this quite strong human feeling running through it."

Keeping control of such a compli-

cated plot isn't necessarily easy. "As I say, I know the big shape and that ultimately controls everything. But within that sometimes the characters do things you don't expect. As in the case of *The Fall of the Families* two of the characters, towards the end, fall in love with one another and disappear. Neddelia and Haberjin, that was them. As I was writing it, and when I had the two characters, I never thought they were going to fall in love. I was writing it, you know everyday, and I found they'd fallen in love - totally different from what I'd expected - and started to live together. I saw that they'd finished their job in the book - you know, their function in the book - and so I let them go off for a holiday out in space."

Mann regards it as a good sign when the characters start to live their own lives: "Oh yes. The characters are deeply in themselves, and they won't allow certain things to happen to them. There's a certain logic. If you create a character and you try to force it to do something it doesn't want to do, then you've got to change the character; or else go with it, because what's coming out is a deeper logic that you're not necessarily aware of. It's a very organic process, writing a book like that. Once you've got the big shape, the theme of the novel if you like, then the actual creation of it is allowing things to happen in a very real way. And because it's real, you can't actually control it all that much. It's controlled by the big shape."

So what would happen if the characters said, "To hell with your big shape, we're going over here"?

"That couldn't happen because they owe their total identity and meaning to the big theme of the novel. At least, it's never happened to me. But in the case of *Pioneers* [1968] I started off with two characters I was just going to tell a story through. It was going to be an episodic book, a series of episodes and adventures of these two people.

"What happened was that the character Angelo in the book, who was a giant with great claws, became really interesting, because he was a clone - sorry, not a clone but artificially made: he was an engineered being. But he got consciousness, and he started asking questions. Now, he should never have been asking questions. His job was to carry out orders, not to ask questions. That character became interesting, and everything as I wrote it gradually came to be seen through his eyes. I suddenly realized that what I was writing was a book about Angelo's coming to consciousness. So I went back and re-worked the beginning, which took no time at all, just re-jigged it. Bang! Then I was on my way, and the novel just unfolded completely. So it did happen. But the shape I ended up writing

about was the one I wanted. The other one was just a series of episodes, but what was the meaning of the series of episodes (which are still there)? Now, it's about the nature of the change in a person's consciousness."

Of course, going with the flow of a character like that means trusting one's subconscious quite a lot: "I do now! I also find that dreams help a lot. I get alternatives, sometimes. I have also dreamt sections of novels. I reckon that when one's writing one writes in a state of semi-hypnosis anyway. You're using your whole brain. You're accessing, in a way, quite deep levels of your sensibilities. Sometimes it comes out in a very strong symbolic form."

This doesn't mean just putting down any old thing and hoping it will do, however: "I'm a very careful writer. I will not let anything go out until I feel it's saying what I want. So I re-write and I re-write and I re-write until I get what I want. I try to craft my books. This is interesting, because earlier I have been talking about the organic element of a book, but at the same time there's a great deal of consciousness comes from choosing the words and picking the words and thinking about it all the time."

Mann also told me that he is probably his own severest critic, but that once the book is out, he never thinks about having written it - his mind is on his next work

I had remembered Mann's work as being quite downbeat. However, he pointed out: "The final line of *The Eye of the Queen* changes everything round. Where most of the book has been looking at the Pe'Ellians and saying how interesting and great they are, at the end of the book this Pe'Ellian called Jet leans forward and says to Mnaba, 'Who knows? In the great scheme of things we may have been created in order to serve you.' Suddenly the whole novel just changes 90 degrees. So no, I don't think that's downbeat. In *The Fall of the Families* you have the cataclysmic destruction of the whole social order throughout the galaxy. Now that's downbeat."

Endings are very important to Mann: "I'm always very interested to see what the final words of a book are. I've always known when I've finished. *Wulfsyarn* is a case in point. My mind went blank after I'd written the last words. It's an extraordinary feeling. I was typing along. I knew I was close to the end but I wasn't sure. I knew they'd found the body and brought it down, and then Wulf's talking. He says, 'I hope that Wilberfoss has a smile on his face, not just a rictus.' Then he says, 'In as much as I can hope for anything, I abide.' Bang. My mind went blank. That's the end. I could not think of another thing; and what had happened was, the book had finished

with Wulf and it had finished with Wilberfoss. I found that interesting: the idea of someone just abiding. That's the truth. Wulf is mechanical. He will abide, and Wilberfoss is within him."

Mann's work seems to have a definite moral dimension: "It deals with moral dilemmas a lot. I'm not trying to preach in any sense of the word. Yet I'm very sure that my loves and my passions are very apparent in the writing - as long as you don't make the mistake of thinking that I am one of the characters, because I'm not. I'm always standing apart from them. The characters do their work but I'm writing about them. I stand well back. But the nature of the book must reflect my own loves and my own fears. Most writers stand clear of using their work to expound particular points of view. That's almost propaganda, isn't it? I don't do that. I'm a story-teller."

His next piece of story-telling will be set in an alternative universe where the Roman Empire never fell and Christianity never arose. Two thousand years after J.C. (Julius Caesar!). Britain is still an imperial province. Yet that is about to change, for the 'big shape' of *A Land Fit For Heroes* will explore the breakdown of civilization and pit order against chaos.

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BRIAN STAFFORD

It had been a peaceful evening. I liked to work late in the lab, when everyone had gone home. It was quiet, and it was lonely. Not that silence ever fell, or that the labs were entirely unpopulated – not my lab, anyhow; but there are special kinds of noises which humans make and there's a special kind of presence that humans have, and while I can hear those noises and feel that presence I can never quite relax.

The other sounds – the hum of machinery, the twittering of the birds, the spinning of the exercise-wheels in the mouse cages – had become a kind of music to me, a lullaby for my anxieties. The physical presence of the animals was a comfort, even though the animals were simply aspects of my enquiries, mere instruments of my overt and covert researches.

I often worked late at the labs. You have to work more than twice as hard when the work you're supposed to be doing is really only a cloak hiding secret work which nobody shares.

When he came into the lab, all the comfort and contentment disappeared. They would have gone in an instant if he had only been human, but he wasn't

– and that added an extra turn of the screw to the pitch of my anxiety. It's a sad fact that the presence of humans, intrinsically disturbing though it was, was less so than the presence of my own kind.

When I was young, and still in the bosom of my family, it had been different; then, the presence of my own kind had always been reassuring, a signal that everything was all right. Nowadays, I felt that I was in hiding from my own kind as well as the others – except, of course, that my own kind could always find me if they really wanted to.

"Francis?" he said, not bothering to add the surname that I was currently using. He didn't immediately come forward. He was being polite, waiting for a reaction.

"I don't know you," I said, and I was sure of that, even though the mere fact that I'd never seen the face he was wearing didn't signify anything at all.

"No," he admitted. "The name I'm using at present is Vincent Napier." Still he kept his distance.

"You seem to know mine," I said drily.

"You're easy to identify. Easy to see, for those who

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have eyes. A teacher is always in the public eye. I'm not criticizing. It's easier to hide in the open, these days. Those of our kind who live as recluses are behind the times. But it'll always be easier for others to know who and where and what you are than for you to know them. And you know there's a risk involved in being what you are, don't you?"

"I know," I said. How could I not know? I could still hear my father's voice, incessantly reminding me of the need to be invisible in the great human crowd.

Once upon a time, I'd harboured childish dreams of using my extra-human capabilities to become a famous sportsman – or a famous anything – but my father had made me feel so ashamed of those kinds of dreams that they had shrivelled and died. It seemed to me that a little bit of my soul had shrivelled too. Mary had hung on to her childish dreams – Father was old-fashioned enough to think that it mattered far less what girls had inside their heads – but mine had perished. I learned never to talk about any of my later ambitions to the family, because I knew that they loved me far too much to let me keep them, and follow

them, and become what I wanted to be.

When I left home, I left for good. So did Mary, but I was the greater disappointment of the two, at least to Father.

"I'm not your enemy, Francis," said he-who-was-presently-Vincent Napier. "I haven't come to call you to account, or even to find out what you're doing. In fact, I'm able to tell you that there are at least some interested parties who approve wholeheartedly of what you're doing, and would move to defend and protect you if..."

He left it there. Well, he would say that, wouldn't he? Whoever he was, whatever he wanted, he'd make that bid for my trusting attention. There was no point in my saying that his "interested parties" couldn't know what I was doing, or why. They could, and they probably did. They didn't have to send ingenious spies out to crack the codes protecting my data-discs, all they had to do was study the camouflage. Anyone who knew that I was doing secret research alongside the work I was publishing, and why, would be able to work out what kind of work it was. A glance round

Illustrations by Kevin Callan

the lab, at the equipment and the animals, would probably have been enough.

I wondered, though, whether he-who-was-presently-Vincent Napier did know much. There are very few of our kind who know the first thing about science any kind of science. My parents and others like them believed with an unshakeable conviction that science is a human thing, and hence worthless, and that the awesome tradition of which we were the inheritors was infinitely finer. After all, they would say, hadn't our traditional wisdom served us well for literally millions of years? And what could biochemical genetics possibly have to teach those who knew the old songs?

Only everything, Father. Only everything.

What do you want?" There was nothing in my voice to welcome him, or to give him permission to approach a single step closer. I wanted to be left alone, to the quiet unsilence and the peaceful absence of anything more intelligent than a cooing dove.

"Do you know a man named William Austerling?" he asked softly.

I did know a man named William Austerling. Not a human man – one of our kind. He was the only man of our kind I had been tempted to make contact with for five years. I would have, if he had not discouraged it. Austerling was, so far as I knew, the only other of our kind engaged in serious research in biochemical genetics in the entire British Isles. If there were others, they didn't go to academic conferences like the one at which I had briefly met Austerling.

I'd been surprised to see him there, but only mildly – and in a way, I was disappointed not to see others. I hadn't been particularly offended when he'd made it clear that he wanted to keep his distance, at least for the time being. I understood how he felt. There had been nearly as much relief as discomfort in the knowledge that he didn't want to make contact yet.

"He heads a private research institute on Salisbury Plain," Napier added, misunderstanding my hesitation. "Partly funded by the Ministry of Defence, partly by... other sources."

"Other sources" was a delicate way of saying "some of us." There have always been some of us who've taken the precaution – purely for defensive purposes, of course – of becoming rich. Money doesn't attract attention if you handle it carefully. Humans are not by nature a discreet species, but wealth imposes its own necessities. Humans have all kinds of ways of hiding money away, and there are those of us who accept that providence most gratefully. For a moment, I envied William Austerling. All my money came from human sources.

"Did Austerling send you? Have you come to offer me a job?"

He permitted himself the faintest of smiles. "No. Although you might be able to get one, if that's what you want. You could have applied on your own account – but you didn't, did you?" He seemed to think that counted in my favour.

"I know Austerling. Why don't you come to the point?"

"I want you to smuggle me into his institute," he said. "I need to get in there without him knowing who or what I am. I want you to serve as my Trojan horse."

"How do you expect me to do that?" I said, almost as astonished by his assumption that I could as by his presumption that I might.

"You have a good reason for demanding to be admitted. Your sister Mary is there, and her life is in danger. Austerling knows you, and if he wants to be difficult you can prove your identity to his satisfaction. If you turn up on his doorstep, he can't turn you away – and if you make enough fuss about getting in, they won't question your statement that the person with you is your father. They don't know your father, but they know you do."

I hardly listened to the latter phases of his Machiavellian reasoning. My thoughts were brought to a near-standstill by what he had said about Mary.

I realized, guiltily, that I hadn't seen Mary for six months, and hadn't even noticed the fact. I hadn't seen her in the flesh for more like twenty years, but I hadn't seen her at all for six months. It's hard to notice an absence, especially from something as inherently uninteresting as TV, even more especially since she'd been reduced to doing ads and bit parts. But I should have realized that she wasn't there. She was my sister, and for years I'd been tracking the progress of her career. The mere fact that her career had been on the wane shouldn't have prevented me noticing her disappearance. The waning had seemed natural enough – she'd had to let her face age, even though her shapeshifting abilities could easily have maintained the appearance of youth. A mimic species has to be responsible even to the frailties of its model. Those of our kind who are in the public eye have to be scrupulous about that sort of thing. I'd aged my own appearance while I'd been at the university.

"What's wrong with her?" I said, feeling my heart quiver with cold anxiety. I hadn't seen her for twenty years, but she was my sister, my only sibling. I had the kind of love for her that only our kind have, and the fact that I'd learned enough human science to be familiar with the logic of kin selection didn't devalue that love at all. Why hadn't Austerling got in touch, given that he knew who and where I was?

"Accidental poisoning," said Napier, too calmly by half. "Some new designer drug – she's always had a habit, Francis, as you probably know. Lately, with her career in the doldrums... she's got in deeper. Most psychotropics affect us much the same way as them, but this one seems to have been the exception. The word is that she nearly died, Francis. Somebody stepped in and took her to Austerling. He didn't know of any place else to take her. Austerling doesn't usually take medical cases, even emergencies involving our kind – but he was pressured into taking this one. Maybe it connects with his work in some way. Look Francis, I don't know about this, but she might be in more danger now than she was before Austerling took her in. You've every reason to demand access to her – and I hope that the fact that I'm telling you this when Austerling wouldn't is reason enough for you to meet my quid pro quo. I need to get in, Francis. We need to know for sure what he's doing there, because if he's doing what we think he's doing, it's something that involves us all – something that we all have a right to know about."

"Something dangerous," I said, almost off-handedly.

"Something dangerous," he echoed – and for the

first time, he took one step closer. "You knew that when you started out in this line of work," he continued, quietly. "You knew that it was dangerous, in every possible way. You must have known, all along, that a time would come... and now it has. You can't stay out of it, Francis. Mary's involvement throws you in at the deep end, but even if there was nothing personal, you'd be involved. You took the decision to involve yourself a long time ago. Now, it's just a matter of which particular route you take to the centre of the maze. I know that you have no real reason to trust me, but you must know that you have no reason to trust anyone else – certainly not Austerling. All I can do is ask, Francis. Will you take me in with you? Will you let me pretend to be your father?"

I could have said no, but I'd known from the beginning that I'd elected to play with dynamite. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing; too much can easily be lethal. The only two things I knew about Vincent Napier were that he had come to tell me that my sister Mary was in danger, and that he wanted me to walk blindfold into the crossfire between two of the mysterious factions which constitute the freemasonry and the secret politics of our society – but as he said, it was all just a matter of which route I intended to take into the heart of the maze.

I'd been willing to talk to Austerling, to share what I knew – but he hadn't wanted to. He had cold-shouldered me... and now he had charge of my sister, and hadn't even taken the trouble to tell me she was ill.

"Do you have a car?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "but we'll take yours. It'll be identifiable. Every little helps."

From that moment on, I was completely in his hands. At his direction I left a note for my lab assistant, saying where I'd gone and why. I also left a message on the professor's answerphone, giving the same information. I didn't phone my parents, in case my doing so somehow upset Vincent Napier's intended masquerade.

He was meticulous. He took the trouble to change his appearance so that he looked the way my father usually looked, even though we had no reason to suppose that anyone at Austerling's research institute had ever seen any member of my family. It couldn't be an exact likeness, because I hadn't seen Father in quite some time, but among our kind likenesses never are exact. One of the benefits of not being prisoners of our flesh is that none of us, at forty or any other age, has to wear the face he truly deserves.

As soon as we were on the road I started a cross-examination. "What exactly is your job, Mr Napier?"

"I'm a soldier," he said. I thought at first he meant it metaphorically; I thought he was simply laying claim to being a humble functionary in one of the factions, but he wasn't. After the briefest of pauses, he went on: "I was in the Gulf last year, with what the newsreaders call the Special Forces. I've fought in every war since the big one."

"World War Two?" I said incredulously.

"World War One," he corrected me. "At least that's what they call it now. At the time, it was the war to end war – the war to save civilization. For our kind, it was the first war – the first one we couldn't entirely avoid. Hundreds did, of course, but even then we were

beginning to be enmeshed in the nets of human bureaucracy. To continue to hide in their midst, at least in nations like this one, we had to be content to be recorded... and once you're recorded, and living a visible life, it's not so easy any more to change your identity. That war was the first war into which any substantial number of our kind were conscripted. We didn't all stay, of course... we were expert deserters, and one glimpse of Flanders fields must have been more than enough for most of those who got that far. But for those few of us who didn't run, for whatever reason, it was quite an experience. Our kind make good soldiers, Francis. We're difficult to kill, and our particular talents are quite an asset. There are several others in the SAS, more in the regiments, and quite a little cadre in MI5 and its shadowy analogues – not nearly as many as there used to be in the KGB, though. There are some places where the only way to be hidden from the watchers is to be among those who watch the watchers..."

"But why?" I asked, even though I knew it was a deflection away from more urgent questions. He knew perfectly well what I meant. Why fight in their wars? Why get caught up in their madness?

"Because we have to," he said. "In order to hide among them, we must do as they do – and the harder it becomes to hide, the more we have to do. We may think that their wars aren't our wars – most of us, I know, think exactly that – but their world is our world, and as long as we're content to remain mimics and fugitives, what they are determines what we can be. We can't just drift with the tides and current of human society, Francis; we have to be part of the processes which shape that society. Whether we like it or not."

His strategy was more subtle than I'd thought. He was deflecting me from the questions I really wanted answered, but he had led me to answers of a kind by a roundabout route. He wasn't giving a name to the faction which he represented. What he was doing was to explain a philosophy: a particular attitude to the complex relationship of human destiny and our destiny.

"Why do you want to get into Austerling's labs?" I asked.

I was too blunt; he simply ignored the question. "I once heard a limerick," he said. "It goes:

"There was a young lady from Riga,
"Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;
"They came back from the ride
"With the lady inside,
"And the smile on the face of the tiger.

"It's a cautionary expansion of a neat little proverb which your father undoubtedly taught you. Who rides a tiger may never dismount."

I'd heard it, but not from my father. He was never that subtle. "So humanity's a tiger," I said, "and our kind is the rider. The tiger could swallow us up if we relaxed our control, and would feel very satisfied with itself if it did. What's it got to do with Austerling, or Mary, or me?"

Bluntness, alas, wasn't getting me anywhere.

"We weren't ready for the Great War," he said airily. "In fact, we weren't ready for the 20th century. We weren't even ready for the Industrial Revolution. The tiger's been out of control for 200 years, Francis, and

things are still getting worse. You of all people must know how difficult it will be to continue living in hiding, in a world where bureaucracy and science are growing apace. Before, I compared it to being caught in a net, but it's actually worse than that. I first realized what it was really like – what it would be like – when I was in France in 1917. That was where I first saw barbed wire. I lost count of the men who stumbled into the wire during night attacks, and got caught – wounded men, mostly. Men who died because they couldn't get clear, because the barbs were digging into their clothing and into their flesh, slowly tearing them apart. That's what's closing around us; that's what will trap us all, if we don't take care. Tangled and trussed by the wire, we'll be helpless – and if the tiger ever figures out that we exist, it will gobble us up."

"But what...?" I began again.

"...does it have to do with Austerling?" he finished for me. "Maybe nothing, Francis. To tell you the truth, we don't know what he's really working on. We know about the surface stuff – the work he does for the MOD – but we don't know about the real secrets. He and his masters are very close-mouthed about that. Just like you. Nothing odd about it, of course – secrecy is our whole way of life, our first instinct, our essential nature. The work we do know about – the work he's doing with and for the humans – is on biological warfare. Where that fits into the politics of tiger-riding, your guess is as good as mine."

I thought about that for a moment while I negotiated a tricky double bend. When I'd come off the M4 it had begun to rain, and now we were way out into the wilds where there were no street-lights the visibility wasn't too good. I was driving just a little too fast for the conditions. I was in a hurry.

"How do you know that I'm not on Austerling's side?" I asked him. "How do you know that if and when I find out what this is all about, I won't take his side against yours?"

"I don't," he said, as I should have known he would. "But it doesn't matter, does it? You probably won't even get to find out which side he's on – but if you do, and want to join it, good luck to you. I'll be long gone, hopefully without their ever realizing that I've been in. Sooner or later, I suppose, you'll have to decide what side you're on – if you don't volunteer, you'll be conscripted – but if I were you, I wouldn't be in any hurry."

I let more time go past, but not because I was mulling over his metaphorical conundrums. I had more practical matters to think about.

"How do you know that Mary's there?" I wondered whether the people he was working for might have put her there, just to set all this up, but it didn't seem very plausible.

"She's well-known," he said. "We steer clear of her, for exactly that reason, but we always keep an eye on people like her." He didn't say, "in case they become too visible" but I knew what he meant. "The drug thing was a touchy situation," he continued. "Touchy enough for someone to pull strings – even touchy enough for them to involve Austerling. We didn't cause this, Francis; it's just a window of opportunity. We can't be sure, mind you, that Austerling's people didn't cause it. If it wasn't an accident..."

He was very slick with the dangling sentences.

Perhaps too slick. It was, after all, a performance he was putting on, to secure my co-operation. It was even less plausible that Austerling's backers might have fed my sister some kind of poison, just to get her off the street, than that someone would do it to set up an opportunity to go in after her.

On the other hand, they hadn't called. Austerling knew who and where I was, but he hadn't called to tell me that my sister was in bad trouble. Maybe he was just following his instincts, being discreet, but the fact remained. He'd have left me out in the cold, while my sister was fighting for her life.

There was a cold knot in my stomach, which grew tighter every time I thought about it.

The road to Austerling's research facility was narrow and winding, and it didn't even have cats'-eyes, but it brought us eventually to a pair of tall iron gates set in a brick wall. It wasn't a particularly intimidating brick wall, and it didn't seem at all out of place as it snaked way into the woods to either side. It was only ten or eleven feet high, with no broken glass or razor wire on top – but it was only a first line of defence.

"There are two more fences inside," Napier said. "Carefully hidden in the bushes – both fitted with alarms. The house is set well back, of course. You'd need a helicopter to catch a glimpse of it."

I got out of the car. The headlights spread enough illumination to show me the telephone mounted on the gate-post, and the camera mounted above it. The camera had already moved to fix its electronic gaze on my face before I picked up the phone, but the searchlight didn't come on until I pressed the buzzer set beneath the cradle.

I didn't stand on ceremony. "This is Francis Marlow," I said, giving the surname by which I was known at the university. "My father's with me. You've got my sister Mary here, and we want to see her. We want to see her now." I didn't have to feign the indignation or the determination.

"This is a restricted area, sir," said a voice at the other end, which might or might not have been human. "I'm afraid I can't let you in. If you care to leave an address where we can contact you, we'll get in touch in the morning."

"The hell you will," I said. "You'll get Austerling, now. We want to see her, now – and we also want to know why he didn't tell us she was here. If we aren't admitted, and if we don't get a satisfactory explanation, I'm going to ask some very awkward questions, in public."

He didn't even bother to argue. "Please wait a few moments, sir," he said. "I'll see if Dr Austerling's available."

Dr Austerling, it transpired, was available. Even at two o'clock in the morning, he was available.

"Dr Marlow," he said, when he came to the phone. "We have met, I believe."

Swiftly and succinctly, without waiting to be asked, I told him when and where we'd met, and just enough of what had passed between us to assure him that I was who I said I was. "That's why," I said, grimly, "I find it so difficult to understand why you didn't take the trouble to tell me that my sister was here. My father and I don't appreciate the fact that the family

had to find out indirectly, from a third party."

"I'm sorry about that," he said smoothly. "I'm afraid that security can become habit-forming. I rather envy you the opportunity to work in a public institution, free of all the red tape that plagues us here. I'll have a word with the Head of Security — I'm sure he'll permit you to enter, under the circumstances."

Several minutes dragged by while some mysterious process took its course within the facility. Then a third voice came on the line, brusquely telling me to get back in the car and wait for the gates to open. I did so, with alacrity, unable to suppress a small pang of triumph over the ease with which I'd fooled them.

The gates opened, and closed again behind us. Our path through the woods was brightly lit by lamps which had come on when the gates opened, but we could see nothing to either side — all the beams were directed on to the winding roadway.

When I pulled up in front of the main building we had three spotlights shining at us; it was impossible to judge how big the house was or how many other buildings there might be. Austerling was waiting for us on the steps, with a uniformed man at his side who I took to be the Head of Security. I was surprised that the uniformed man was a human, but only slightly. It might be ironically easy, I supposed, to keep secrets from a Head of Security.

Napier hung back while I went forward, claiming the full attention of the waiting men. I knew that wouldn't seem odd, even though he was supposed to be the father and I the son. I was a man of the world, and he — supposedly — was just some tradition-bound stick-in-the-mud from way up north.

"What's wrong with her?" I said, without ceremony. "Don't beat about the bush — I'm not a medical doctor but you know full well that I can understand all the words."

Austerling's eyes said: not in front of the human. I already knew that whatever had happened to Mary had something to do with our particular nature, but I wasn't about to be fobbed off with that kind of appeal.

"We really don't know, Dr Marlow," Austerling began, all the while begging me with his body-language to bear with him. I made a dismissive gesture with my hand as I climbed the steps.

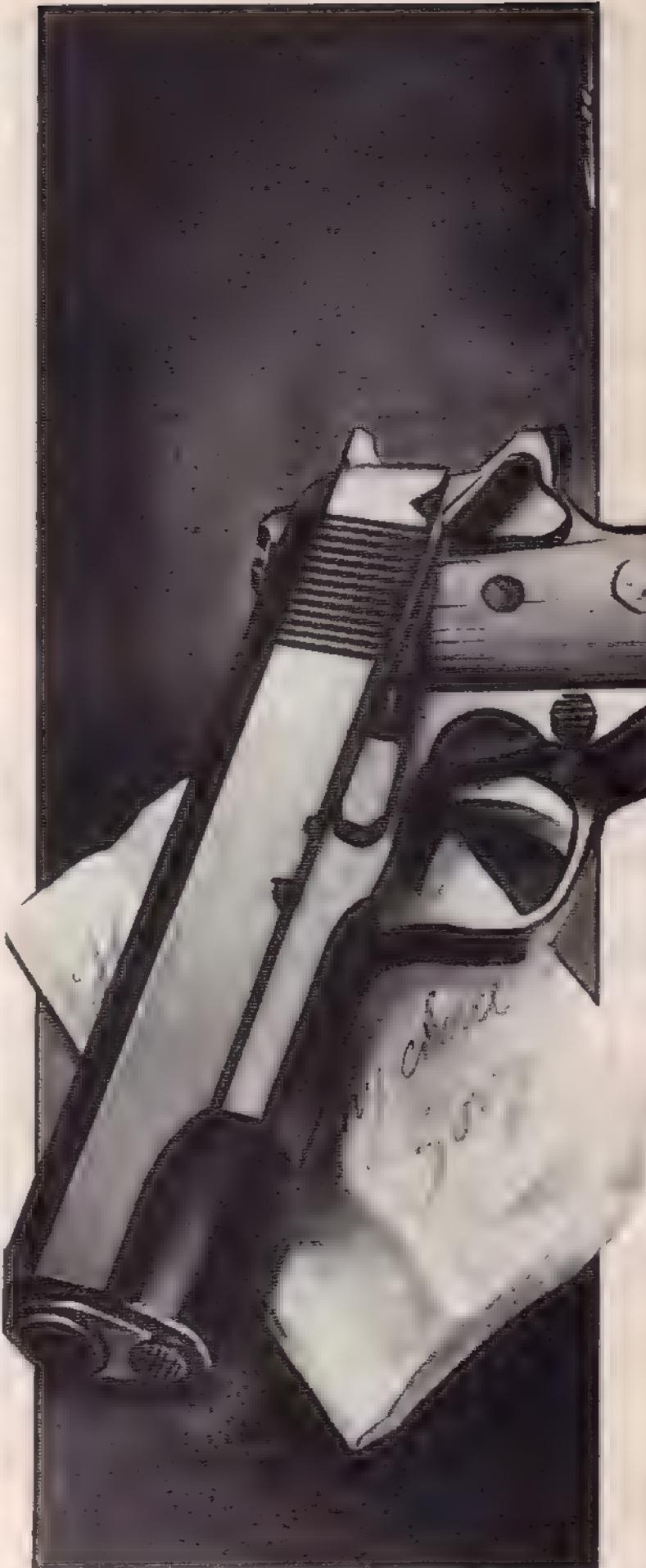
"Where is she?" I demanded

Austerling turned to the security man, as if to say: "You see how it is — what can I do?" The security man stepped forward, as if he intended to take over, but I cut him off before he was half way into his first word.

"I don't give a damn about your rules and regulations," I said, looking him straight in the eyes. "We don't want to hear about security clearances or any other crap like that. You had no right to bring her here, but now she is here you have no right to keep us away from her. If you don't want us around your lousy germ warfare labs, then you'd better ship my sister out to some NHS hospital where we don't have to go through all this shit to get to see her, okay?"

The security man was probably about to protest that he didn't want Mary here any more than he wanted me here, but it was Austerling's turn to cut him off.

"I'm truly sorry about all this, Ned," he said, invoking all the authority and balm of his best bedside manner. "I know it seems as though one irregularity is leading to another, but I'll take full responsibility. I'll



square everything with the Department – you have my word on it. Please bear with us."

It was the decisive move. The security man was annoyed, but he backed off after a bit of token blustering, and Austerling left him standing as he hustled us through the main doors and into the hallway. He didn't pause there – he hurried us along a side-corridor and up a flight of stairs. All his attention was still fixed on me – nobody had spared poor "Father" a second glance.

Tell me," I insisted, once we were clear of the human. "No bullshit – I want to know."

"To tell you the truth," he said with a sigh, "I'd be glad of a second opinion. It's something I've never seen before. Apparently, the stuff she took is some new synthetic drug – I really don't know anything about that sort of thing, but the people in London who panicked say that there's a whole series of them coming on to the market... it's supposed to be a mild hallucinogen, and that's all it is, for humans. Toxic, of course, but not in low doses. Our kind shouldn't play with things like that – we really shouldn't. We need our presence of mind, always. Even alcohol... but that's not the point. This isn't just a matter of lowered inhibitions... somehow, this drug went straight to the chemistry of the mechanism by which we consciously direct our mimicry. It screwed up the whole process. It was the change itself that panicked our people, Francis, but that's not the whole of it. She's lost her power to change. It looks bad, and we're not making any headway..."

We arrived at the room where Mary was. Austerling looked both ways down the corridor before taking a key from his pocket. There was nobody about but us. For the first time he looked directly at Napier – but not suspiciously. He had not the slightest notion that Napier was anyone but who I said he was.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Austerling with awkward formality. "This is going to come as a shock."

Napier nodded gravely. He looked like a father, anxious for his offspring.

Austerling opened the door and preceded us through it. I stayed back to close it, gripped by reflexive politeness.

I don't think Napier had to feign the gasp of alarmed surprise he let out when he saw the sleeping form of what was supposed to be his daughter. I didn't have to feign mine.

I'd heard, as we all do, that the kinds of faces you pull as a kid, trying to test the limits of grotesquerie, are nothing by comparison with the kinds of changes that can overtake you, if you really lose control and your hind-brain sets out to display the secrets buried away in our evolutionary heritage. I'd always thought of those stories as something made up purely for the purpose of training kids to be careful; now I wasn't so sure.

Mary looked like something out of an old sci-fi movie. It was as if she was wearing a rubber-faced lizard-man mask, shaped for nightmare effect. She didn't look real any more; she looked like something inert, something nightmarish. But she was breathing.

It wasn't a mask, of course.

I hadn't realized. Somehow, I had just taken it for

granted that she'd be lying there looking the way she always did – unconscious, possibly surrounded by life-support equipment, but still herself. "Accidental poisoning," Napier had said. "She's lost her power to change," Austerling had added. There had been no way I could put two and two together and imagine this.

Suddenly, it became abundantly clear why Austerling had been anxious about what I might say in front of the uniformed man.

"Has that security man...?" I began dazedly.

"Of course not," said Austerling. "The only humans who did see her, mercifully, think it was a hallucination. Now you know why the people who brought her here panicked – and now you know why I didn't dare turn her away. We have to find out how to counter this drug, Francis. For all our sakes."

I touched the skin of my sister's face, gingerly. It felt like the skin of some huge, obscenely-bloated snake, made of soft and silky-leathery scales. She didn't wake up.

"Why didn't it just wear off," I whispered. "Surely she's metabolized the stuff by now, or excreted it. It can't be permanent. It can't be."

"We're in unknown territory," said Austerling bitterly. "Dangerous territory, too. Ned's security works both ways, you know – he's supposed to watch me as well as keeping the world at bay. We're in trouble here, Francis. There are only twenty of our kind here, and more than fifty of theirs. You can't begin to understand what's at stake here, and how hard it is to maintain one secret organization within another. I'm sorry we didn't inform you, but we simply didn't dare. You do understand that, don't you?"

I nodded dumbly. I could see why he'd been reluctant, and why I hadn't had as much reason as I supposed to be angry about it.

"But I really am glad that you found out," he went on. "On this one, I'll take all the help I can get. She does wake up occasionally, but she's not... well, you'll see in due course. There's no point waking her now. She can't speak, and she doesn't seem to understand what anyone says to her. You can stay with her if you want, but I'd like you to look over the test results. I can't show them to any of my human colleagues, you see, and... well, maybe you can think of something that we haven't tried. I'd be grateful if you could. Maybe you know something we don't..."

He didn't have to explain his vagueness about what I might know. I was a loner. Nobody knew exactly what I was working on, exactly what I might have discovered. He knew how unlikely it was that I'd be able to help, but he also knew that he couldn't entirely rule out the possibility.

"You go," said the man who was pretending to be my father. "I'll stay with her." I'd almost forgotten him. He got the tone of voice exactly right: shock, grief, pain, paternal dignity... it was all in there. I knew, of course, that what he really wanted was a chance to get on with his own secret mission, but I didn't care.

There was no way Mary could be permitted to stay this way forever, or even for long, whether she was here or anywhere else. If she couldn't change back to human form, Austerling would have no alternative but to kill her, and I'd have to let him. All my life my

family had thought me indiscreet, but I understood the absolute boundaries as well as anyone. We didn't dare let the humans know that there were monsters in their midst. They would turn on us like tigers, gobble us up, and smile with relief and satisfaction.

"You'd better show me everything," I said to Austerling, "as quickly as you can."

As we left, he turned to my fake father and said: "I'm afraid I'll have to lock you in."

Napier didn't even turn around. He just shrugged off the irrelevancy, and kept his eyes fixed on that dreadful face, for all the world like a father stricken dumb by horror and misery. Austerling couldn't possibly have doubted, even for a moment, that he understood the significance of that fatalistic shrug – but he didn't.

I did, but I didn't care. I was no longer concerned with Vincent Napier's secret mission; I had a more urgent mission of my own.

I studied the documents with minute care.

There was an analysis of the drug which Mary had taken. The people who'd brought her in had seized a substantial sample, and Austerling's people had investigated its biochemistry as thoroughly as they were able. There were also the results of a whole battery of physiological tests which they'd done on Mary.

I understood it all well enough, but I couldn't see anything in it that pointed to an obvious solution to the problem, or even a real explanation of what had happened.

When I was sure that I had the complete picture in my head I laid the documents down again on Austerling's leather-topped desk. He was sitting behind the desk, patiently watching me. His expression was bleak, but there was a glimmer of curiosity in his gaze. I remembered that I must be as much a mystery to him as he was to me. He hadn't dared to strike up an acquaintance at the conference, but he had a better opportunity now to find out how much I knew, and what kind of work I was doing at the university. He was understandably intrigued.

"It's only a temporary glitch," I said, desperate to believe it. "The metabolic mechanism is jammed, but it can be freed again, if only we can kick-start it, or supply the right kind of oil. It's just a matter of working out how."

He nodded. Neither of us want to waste time discussing the possibility that what had happened to Mary might be permanent and irredeemable. If that were so, it wouldn't be just a personal tragedy – the future of our species would be under threat.

"The drug's intended effect – and its actual effect – is to interfere with neurotransmission," I said slowly. "According to your analysis, it promotes the kind of quasi-random firing which is usually responsible for hallucinogenic sensory distortions, and it also excites the dopamine system, so that there's a simultaneous euphoric high. But your tests show that her serotonin levels are abnormally high – that's surely the wrong way round?"

"Not necessarily," said Austerling. "We have rather better homeostatic mechanisms than humans do. Mary's system reacted to the dopamine boost by producing a compensatory increase in serotonin – and

for our kind, that was normal. The high would have disappeared fairly quickly, but the hallucinations would probably have continued, at least for a while. I think the problem developed afterwards. Either something happened to the dopamine system itself as a result of the drug's effect – cell damage of some kind – or..."

He left the sentence dangling, like bait. I could see where he was pointing. According to the textbooks we'd both read, the third important protein in the human cycle was norepinephrine, the chemical which imprinted the cellular "memory" of dopamine-reward and serotonin-sensitivity, but I had no idea whether we were significantly different – or, if so, how.

I felt that I had to improvise, partly just to prove myself to Austerling but mainly because I knew that he'd already tried to solve the problem and failed. If I could come up with something he hadn't thought of, we might be up and running.

"Or the feedback system's been thrown out," I said. "She can't restore her own dopamine levels, and she can't activate the theriomorphic mechanism, maybe for the same reason. Have you tried injecting dopamine?"

"Yes," he said. "We also tried its immediate metabolic precursor, to see if we could reactivate the metabolic cycle at an earlier stage. Nothing."

"The trouble is," I went on, still speaking slowly to give myself a chance to think it, "if it's the norepinephrine that's screwed up, we can't compensate externally. It's not the quantity of norepinephrine that's vital to the work it does – it's the location of the effect. If the neuronal pathways which enable her consciously to change her appearance have been blocked because the norepinephrine's fouled up, it isn't easy to see how we might unblock them."

"How much do you know about the differences between our brain chemistry and theirs?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," I admitted. "As you must have deduced, I've been tracking the genetic differences between our kind and theirs, but I've been forced to concentrate entirely on the somatic cells. I only have one experimental subject of our kind to work with, you see – and that limits the kind of tissue-samples I can readily obtain."

At another time, the faint irony might have prompted a smile, but he just nodded.

"You know, of course, that we're not particularly closely related to humans, biologically speaking?" he said

"I'd worked that out," I agreed. "According to the genes, we're about as closely related to humans as rats are. I figure that our line might have diverged from theirs as early as the Jurassic – the mimetic imperative didn't begin to bring us back into line until the Eocene, a hundred million years later. By that time, we'd evolved our own idiosyncratic versions of almost all the major proteins. The first time one of our kind is tested for a genetic fingerprint he's going to show up like a flaming beacon. The neurotransmitters are so basic and so specific in function that there shouldn't be a lot of difference across the entire mammalian spectrum – but then, we're rather special, aren't we? I know that our somatic cells have extra neuronal networks and extra cellular subsystems that

allow us to change, but I don't know the first thing about what happens at the brain end. Do you?"

"A little," he said. "But not enough. You're right about norepinephrine being very important, but in our brains it doesn't work alone. There's some kind of secondary cell-memory system, which seemingly preserves a set of basic templates for our shape-shifting abilities. Nowadays, of course, we draw upon the human template almost exclusively – but the others are still there, and by no means atrophied. Our aging process inhibits our facility for change, and it also tends to favour a gradual reversion to more primitive templates. The ones we see in our old folk aren't far removed from the human, but there may be older templates locked away at the biochemical level. Perhaps there's even a saurian one. If there is, we've lost – or perhaps never had – the ability to draw upon it consciously, but it might still be effective if given the right biochemical stimulus. That's the hypothesis I've been working on. The question is, how do we persuade the archetype to disappear, given that we don't actually know how the extra system – I call it para-norepinephrine for convenience – actually works?"

I looked down at the useless papers on the desk, which told us everything except what we really needed to know. "You say she's conscious sometimes?" Her mental state wasn't recorded; the documents dealt entirely with matters of physiology.

"Conscious but not at all coherent," he confirmed. "She seems to be in a constant state of terror – but given her serotonin levels, that's not entirely surprising. Dopamine calms her, but only for a while. She doesn't seem to be able to speak, or to understand speech."

I thought about that for a few seconds, and about the fact that Austerling's people hadn't even thought it worth recording.

"We don't actually know that the problem is biochemical at all," I said. "It could be psychological. The high serotonin levels might be a consequence rather than a cause."

"That's a distinction without a difference," he said. "We're at the interface where psychology and physiology meet. We're not talking about some little Freudian glitch here – some repressed guilt that only surfaces in disturbing dreams, or some petty neurosis based in her uneasy relationship with her father. We aren't human, Francis. We don't have those kinds of hang-ups."

He spoke with open contempt, as my real father might have spoken – as nine out of ten of us would have spoken. But I wasn't so sure. I wasn't at all certain that we couldn't and didn't suffer from the same kinds of hang-ups as humans. I thought about my own life, and the way I'd followed Mary into voluntary exile... and then I thought about the way that Napier had talked while we drove down, about the business of war and the tactics of tiger riding.

"Maybe," I said, "it wasn't some unforeseen neurochemical effect at all. Maybe it was the particular hallucination she suffered when the psychotropic hit. Maybe she dreamed that she was something different, and maybe the dream caught her up and wouldn't let her go."

I knew how easy it is for scientists to fall in love

with their own hypotheses, but even so, I felt that I was on a better and more hopeful track than the one Austerling had been following. I had to hope so, because it was the only track I could see which led to a possible solution.

Maybe, I thought, the kind of life that Mary had elected to live among humans – deliberately cut off by her own kind – had finally come to the point where it was insupportable. Maybe, even if only subconsciously, she wanted out. Maybe the drug, just by lowering her inhibitions, had given her an opportunity to express that wish to get out, as extremely as possible, at the cellular level. Because our kind had evolved consciousness and intelligence in parallel with humans, we'd obtained conscious control over our ability to mimic humans – but maybe we retained, in our collective subconscious, the ability to make much grosser changes.

"You say she's not coherent," I said, "and that she isn't able to speak. Maybe that's because she threw away the ability to speak human-fashion, and even the ability to think human-fashion. But maybe... just maybe... all we have to do is reach her, and make her understand what it is that she's done to herself."

"You think we can talk her out of this?" said Austerling incredulously. But the contempt wasn't quite so strong as it had been before. Hope was beginning to thrust it aside. He wasn't yet ready to believe that I was right, but he could see that if I were right, then the implications for the future of the species might not be so bleak after all.

"I don't think we can talk her out of it," I said, permitting myself a slight sneer of my own. "But I think I might. I'm her brother. If anyone can get through to her, it's me."

He hesitated, but then he nodded. "Okay."

"There's one thing I'll need." When I told him what it was, he looked impatient, as if he thought that my sense of melodrama was getting the better of my scientific judgment – but then he shrugged, and found me what I wanted.

"If you're right," he said, as we went back along the corridor, "the problem might already have been taken care of. Your father may have done the job while we were talking."

I didn't reply to that. If Napier was doing a job, he'd be far away from Mary's room by now. I knew full well, in fact, that our returning might blow the lid off whatever it was he'd come to do – but I'd only promised to get him in; I hadn't promised to buy him time. I wanted to get on with the work that I had come to do.

At first, when Austerling unlocked the door of Mary's room to let us back in, I thought I'd been wrong about Napier. The chair in which he'd been sitting when we left was still occupied, and the person in it was wearing the clothes that Napier had worn. But the way he was sitting was all wrong, and he certainly wasn't asleep.

"What the hell?" said Austerling, explosively.

He took three strides forward, taking hold of the sitter's head and twisting it so that he could look into the face.

It was a human face, and its humanness wasn't any mere pretence.

It was the security man Austerling had addressed as Ned, and he was dead. His neck had been broken.

I felt sick, because I hadn't expected it, and because I knew that I ought to have. I'd simply assumed that no damage would be done, and I'd had no right to assume any such thing.

Austerling looked back at me, his face desperate with anger and despair, and I began to realize at last the true magnitude of my offence.

"You stupid fool!" he said. "What have you done, you stupid bloody fool?"

There was a gun on the dead man's lap, and underneath the gun there was a note. Austerling picked them both up, scowled at the words which were neatly printed on the paper, and then handed to message to me. He kept the gun.

HE LET HIMSELF IN AS SOON AS YOU'D GONE, said the note. I HADN'T ANY CHOICE. SORRY.

If it was true, then Napier had killed the security man for Mary's sake, and for my sake, and for Austerling's sake, and for the sake of the Great Secret, as well as for his own. If it was true. It probably was. On the other hand, if I hadn't come storming in the way I had, maybe the security man's curiosity about what Austerling was hiding in here wouldn't have overflowed.

"Who is he?" Austerling demanded, having obviously worked out that Napier wasn't my father. He wasn't exactly pointing the gun at me, but the rapport we'd established had definitely turned sour.

"I don't know," I said.

"Where is he?"

I shrugged helplessly. The fact that I didn't know the answers to the questions suddenly seemed very embarrassing. I hadn't anticipated murder, but now that murder had been done, I knew that I was an accessory. I'd never been one of those who feel that killing humans is no worse than slaughtering cattle or swatting flies, but even if I had, I'd have been compelled to recognize that this murder was also an act of outrageous indiscretion, and hence must be reckoned a truly heinous crime.

Austerling, his face ugly with wrath, plucked the receiver from the phone beside the bed. I got the impression that he was still making up his mind about what to say and do while he lifted the instrument to his mouth.

"It's Austerling," he said. "I'm in the girl's room. There's an intruder on the premises – one of ours. He's wearing Kelly's face and uniform. Kelly's dead. Don't sound the alarm; this is our business. Stop him if you can – kill him if necessary – but don't let the humans find out what's happening. Pass the word. Make sure all of our people know the score. And send someone up here to take care of Kelly's body."

Mary stirred in her sleep, moaning slightly, as if she were trying to wake up. But she didn't wake up. Whatever her dream was, she was its prisoner. It wasn't letting go.

It really is a dream, I told myself, trying to force my attention back to the real issue. That's what I have to fight. Not some mysterious para-norepinephrine; just a bad dream.

Austerling put the phone down and turned back to me. His face was still pale, but it was under control. Even among ourselves, we know only too well how to prevent our features mirroring our inner selves. The gun in his hand was pointed at the floor.

"Why?" he asked. I had to admire the way he'd worked it all out – not only what had happened, but what to do about it. He was a quick thinker, when it came to matters he understood, and he didn't bother to repeat questions to which he wasn't going to get any answers. He always moved on.

"Quid pro quo," I said. "You should have told me about Mary. He convinced me that you were hiding her – implied very delicately that you might have sinister plans for her. I didn't have time to check his credentials, even if I knew who to check them with, or who he really is. You can probably guess who he might be better than I could."

He shook his head. Despite his self-control, the desolation showed through. He knew that he might lose everything, if our own people couldn't keep the humans in the dark. If his relationship with the Ministry of Defence was compromised, his secret masters might have to pull him out and relocate him – or maybe close him down for good.

"You," he whispered. "You, of all people. You're probably the only person in England who understands what I'm trying to do – and the necessity of doing it."

"And vice versa," I said. "But that didn't stop you freezing me out when we met. You must have checked me out. You knew exactly why I was on my own, outside the community. You decided to let things be – and when Mary was dumped on you, your instinct was still to leave me out of it. You should have told me."

I realized how much bitterness I had stored up. I realized how glad I'd been to be given a chance to hit back at Austerling and all that Austerling represented: my exclusion from every faction, every supportive network of our kind. I realized just how much I'd envied Austerling, his secretly-funded research establishment, and the approval which the makers and movers of our kind had bestowed upon him and not on me.

There was a knock at the door, and he pushed past me to answer it. I went to Mary's side, sitting down on the bed because I was too squeamish to disturb the corpse slumped in the chair. I reached out to try to shake her awake, determined to ignore what was going on behind me.

Having checked out who it was, Austerling opened the door to let in two men. They were both big and muscular. When our kind go in for physical culture they make good use of their natural advantages. These men were part of the security team within the security team. I don't know what effect they had on the humans, but they certainly scared me. One of them came forward to inspect the body while the other stayed with Austerling.

"Who is he?" asked the newcomer. He didn't mean the body, or me.

"I don't know," said Austerling dully. "He doesn't, either – or says he doesn't. Do you know anything at all, Dr Marlow?"

There wasn't any reason not to tell them what little I knew. I didn't owe any loyalty to anyone. I turned back briefly, and said: "He's using the name Vincent Napier. I think he's in the SAS – or was until recently. I don't know one faction from another, but he talked a lot about the need to control the humans. He spoke

of our situation as riding a tiger, and he seemed to feel some sense of urgency about the possibility of the ride coming to an uncomfortable end in the very near future. He didn't say what he wanted here."

The phone rang, and I picked up the receiver reflexively before it was snatched from my hand by the man who was inspecting the body. "Fisher," he said curtly. After listening for half a minute he put the instrument down again.

"He's gone," he said. "He didn't even try for any of the infectious agents. It wasn't the germ-cultures he was after, nor anything to do with the hidden programme. He's got the new immunoserum, though - the papers too. All the stuff relating to Diwaniya."

"We can replace the paperwork," said Austerling. "Can you cover it up? Can you...oh, shit!"

The expletive was a response to the sound that had interrupted him: the wail of sirens. As he swore he glanced sideways at the man beside him, who shook his head.

"It must be him," said Fisher. "He's cutting his way out. But we haven't lost yet - the humans will assume that it's someone coming in. If we send them out to search the grounds they won't catch him, and we'll have a chance to cover things up. It'll be touch and go, but..."

"Do it," said Austerling. "Leave the body. It's too risky to take it out now. Kelly will have to disappear into thin air. I don't want him found in those clothes, and his disappearance will add to the smokescreen. There's still just a chance that we might come through this. The Foundation won't be pleased about the immunoserum - but at the end of the day, that's of very marginal importance to our own work."

Fisher grunted, and looked down at Mary, who was stirring in her sleep, but still not awake.

"What about her?" he demanded.

"Leave her too," said Austerling. "Francis has an idea. If it works, we can smuggle them both out alive. If it doesn't..."

He looked at me as he left that one dangling. I didn't bother to tell him that I'd prudently left word where I'd be. Things had got beyond the point where minor indiscretions counted for much. If the threat was seriously meant, and they really did have to contemplate disposing of both of us, they wouldn't worry about the people at the university asking questions.

Deliberately, I turned my back on all of them. My hand was still on Mary's shoulder, and I began shaking her - not too vigorously, but with increasing insistence.

Fisher and his companion went out again, but Austerling stayed. He locked the door behind them, and I could feel his gaze upon me. I didn't bother to wonder how much hostility there was in his stare. My predicament was simple enough. If I was right about Mary's problem being psychological, and if I could break down the barrier she'd erected between herself and the human world which had swallowed her up entire, we'd be all right. Everything would be all right. It didn't matter what kind of panic was raging outside; my part was here.

Then her eyes opened, and it seemed that my heart stopped.

Mary's eyes weren't human. They were like the eyes of a snake: vivid yellow, with lenticular pupils. They fixed themselves upon me as though they were the eyes of a cobra intent on fascinating a bird. I had to tell myself that I didn't mind, that it was what I wanted, that it was good that she should look at me in that fearsome way.

"Mary," I said softly. "It's me. It's Francis."

I didn't have to change my face very much. Hardly at all, in fact. Unlike her, I'd always worn the same features. I'd never tried to become unusually handsome. The only thing I had to do to recover the appearance of the golden years we'd spent together was to ease away the false signs of aging.

She opened her mouth, but all that came out were inarticulate grunts. She couldn't revert mentally the way she'd reverted physically. She had no templates in her brain for long-extinct cultures and long-extinct languages. All she could do was grunt like an animal in pain, a forlorn creature which had lost touch with its species and its true identity.

"I know you can understand me," I said to her. "Whether you're conscious of it or not, you can understand what I'm saying. You know who I am, if you'll only let yourself remember.

"I've come to tell you that it's over, Mary. The exile, the ostracism. It's over. You can come home with me, and live with me, for as long as you like, and as long as you need. They'll never separate us again, Mary, not now. It's all over, and it's time to start again. You know that, don't you? Your brain knows... your body knows... but this isn't the way. You have to take control. You have to decide what you want to be.

"You have to get your voice back, and your face. Do you remember what a beautiful voice you had, Mary? Do you remember how proud Father and Mother used to be of your voice? Do you remember how you used to sing the old songs, by the fireside, in the dead of winter when the snow was on the moors? Do you remember how happy we were? I was happy too, even though I was always getting things wrong, always being indiscreet. I couldn't sing the way you could, Mary, but I always loved listening to you. I always loved listening to you."

She tried to say something, but all that came out were grunts. I heard Austerling move, adjusting his position. He didn't say anything, but I knew he was thinking about norepinephrine and para-norepinephrine, about some kind of vicious chemical truth drug, which could take away our magical powers and reveal us for the monsters we are. This was a bad night for him.

"I know that you can hear me, Mary," I said. "I probably sound strange, because your ears are playing tricks on you, but I know that you know who I am. You see, you're playing tricks on your ears, and on your voice, and on your face. You're playing tricks on yourself, but you really don't have to go on with it now. You can stop now, because everything's okay. I'm here, and I'm going to take you home with me."

"You can stay with me forever, if you want to. I'll never leave you again. You'll sing to me, the way you used to sing to all of us. In fact, we'll go back to see the family this winter. We'll all be together again, just the way it used to be. Do you remember what a beautiful voice you had, Mary? Do you remember what a

beautiful face you had? I'm going to show you something now, Mary — and I don't want you to be frightened, because it really isn't anything to be frightened of. All you have to do is remember, Mary. Remember who and what you are. That's all. If you remember, everything will be all right."

I lifted up the thing I'd asked Austerling to give me: the mirror which would reflect her intimidating gaze straight back into her terrible eyes.

I felt like Perseus confronting Medusa, and wondered whether we were in any way responsible for the origin of that myth. We probably were. We seem to have been responsible for most of the others.

Mary looked at herself in the mirror, and she screamed.

In spite of what I'd said, she was terrified — but that didn't matter. The fact that she could scream was itself a seed of hope. She wouldn't have screamed if she hadn't been able to see. She wouldn't have screamed if she hadn't been able, consciously or subconsciously, to understand.

I knew when she screamed that I was right. The drug had only been the facilitator, not the cause. She'd done this to herself. She'd erased her own humanity, because she simply couldn't bear to be human any more, cut off by her family and her species. She'd reached the end of her tether, and the drug had set her nightmares free.

Once upon a time, I remembered, I'd thought that our kind might be really beautiful people, if we'd only loosen up and let ourselves go, if we'd only condescend to take heed of what the humans had learned about the way to live. But that had been back in the 1960s, when the human world was a brighter place. It was the 90s now, and dead of night. Now, the battle wasn't to be beautiful. Now, the battle was simply to be less ugly.

While I watched her hideous face, its reptilian lines began to soften. The eyes changed first, but the skin was already softening, losing its dreadful colour. The process would take hours to complete, but once it had begun I knew that nothing was going to stop it.

I lowered the mirror, and she closed her eyes. For a second or two I felt a stab of anxiety, in case the process might go into reverse, but it didn't.

I had been right and Austerling had been wrong. The chemistry was consequence, not cause. The bad trip had come to an end. She was coming back to reality.

I looked round at Austerling. He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and nodded even more slightly in grudging acknowledgement.

“You should have called me,” I said, still feeling that I had to make it clear. “You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble.”

“So it seems,” he said. “I'll just have to hope that it all works out for the best. Maybe it will. Maybe your friend Napier has done us all a favour. Maybe I should have called him too, and made him a present of what he wanted.”

“What was it he took?”

“Not what you thought,” he said. “You thought he wanted something of ours, didn't you? Some terrible secret that I'd discovered about our nature, our genes.



Well, he doesn't give a damn about our secrets-within-the-secret. He was only interested in the work we're doing for the MOD – the biological warfare research. No matter what people may think, you know, that work really is defensive. We're not trying to engineer new plagues – we're trying to find defences against the plagues that other people might be breeding... are breeding. Whoever starts the first plague war, it won't be the people who fund our research. We do have some dangerous organisms here, but they're very secure. Your friend didn't even try to lay his hands on them. The material he wanted isn't dangerous at all – not in itself."

"An immunoserum," I said, remembering what the man called Fisher had said. "What's Diwaniya?"

"It's a city in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had a top-security research unit of his own there, before the war. The allies' special forces went in to raid it, some time before the invasion. They seized all the paperwork on Saddam's biological warfare programme. Official channels directed it here."

I frowned. "He said that he'd been in Iraq. He must have been with the raiders. But what did he come here for, if he'd already had access to all the paperwork?"

"He came for the antidote," said Austerling with all the venom he could muster. "We were given something the Iraqis had developed. We were asked to find an immunoserum as quickly as we could, just in case the stuff was used. It wasn't – but we had the serum ready anyway. The reason it wasn't used was that Saddam didn't have an immunoserum himself. There's no point in launching a plague war if you can't protect your own troops. Even Saddam wasn't that crazy. I have no way of knowing how many people inside and outside Iraq have stockpiles of this particular bug, but until now none of them dared use it. I've no way of knowing, either, just what your friend is going to do with the antidote he took – but I'd guess that he intends to do a little tiger-hunting with it. What do you think, Dr Marlow?"

I saw, finally, what all Napier's talk about the necessity of control had been aiming at. Whatever faction he represented was anxious about the rapid progress made by humankind. They wanted to put a brake on. But mass murder isn't our style. To be that direct, we'd have to come out of hiding. Our style is more along the lines of "let's you and him fight." Napier's masters didn't want to launch a plague war themselves – they just wanted to make it easier for the humans to do it to one another...and, of course, to make absolutely sure that they themselves weren't caught in any crossfire.

"They're going to give it to Saddam," I whispered. "They're going to hand a superweapon to the craziest human on Earth – to a man who won't give a damn if millions of his own people perish with the enemy, as long as his inner circle is protected."

Austerling shrugged. "Maybe not to Saddam," he said. "There isn't any shortage of lunatics of his particular stripe. And you know who else won't give a damn, provided that they can protect themselves, don't you? There's us, of course – not just Napier's faction, but all the others too. They'll just shrug their shoulders and congratulate themselves on not having been forced to make the nasty decision. And do you

think for a single minute that the human rulers of any Western country are going to shed too many tears over the depopulation of the Third World, or the Middle East, or even their own constituencies...just so long as they can protect themselves? Don't worry about it too much, Francis. If Napier hadn't done it, Kelly might have...and if not Kelly, Fisher...and if not Fisher...choose any name you want to, Francis. Any name at all."

I looked at him, dumbfounded.

"It was inevitable," he said, with a sigh. "It's been inevitable ever since they cracked the genetic code. We've already started talking about warfare in terms of biological analogies: surgical strikes, clinical bombing. What is war, at the end of the day, but a phase in the eternal Darwinian struggle of the genes... the competition between and within species? You and I know that better than anyone, don't we, Francis? We understand. And we know, don't we, who the only real winners of the impending plague wars are going to be? After Armageddon, our kind will really be in control."

I turned away from his sardonic smile, and I looked at Mary, who was lying in the bed with her eyes closed, slowly and peacefully reverting to her true, mock-human self.

She had a way to go yet, but she wasn't a monster any more.

I felt, just then, that the only monster in the room was me.

Austerling was right, of course. It was inevitable all of it. I had no need to feel unduly guilty because of the tiny part I'd played in oiling the wheels of change.

I glanced at the dead man, too. He was the most placid of us all – the only one who didn't have to cope with anxiety and guilt, loneliness and fear.

We all ride tigers, I thought. Whatever and whoever we are, we all have our particular tigers to ride. And it doesn't really matter how good we are at keeping our particular secrets and serving our particular causes. When the ride ends, it's always the tiger that wears the smile.

The bleak thought made me lean forward and take my sister's shoulders in my arms. I drew her body towards me, and cradled her head upon my chest. Soon, she would be the Mary I knew and loved – the Mary I hadn't held in my arms for far too long.

Some day, I knew, our kind would be forced to own up to who and what we were. The mere appearance of humanity would not be sufficient to conceal our existence and our difference. Maybe, as Napier's faction obviously hoped, we could kill off enough humans before that day came to become the dominant species, and maybe that would be a reward of sorts for millions of years of patience and discretion. It wasn't what I wanted, and I didn't like being manipulated into serving that cause, but at the end of the day we all have to come to terms with who and what we are, and what we're prepared to do for the sake of those we love.

I hugged my sister, and hummed the tune of the oldest song I knew, and tried to remember the beautiful sound of her singing voice.

Ansible Link

David Langford

As the dull press releases pour in, this page keeps pleading for more News As Entertainment. An unadorned "Author Sells Book" item does not excite (do trade journals elsewhere carry stories of "Bricklayer Lays Brick"?). "Clute Slays Seven, Dies In Cocaine Brawl" — now you're talking. "Greenland Sells Book Despite Ravages of M.E., Blames Illness on Occult Resonance of Title Harm's Way, Claims Next Will be Called Sex, Wealth and Immortality" — nice one, Colin, but please don't try too hard...

These Restless Heads

Steve Baxter has found that Life imitates Art: "I have a story in the *Weerde II* anthology whose first line is 'We want you to assassinate Stephen Hawking.' Last weekend I was in Cambridge signing books at Heffer's bookshop. Afterwards I was driving out of town and approaching lights when suddenly, out of nowhere — you've guessed it — a motorized wheelchair came plummeting across the road in front of me. I did an emergency stop, no harm done... the chap in the wheelchair grinned hugely and a worried-looking lady came running to pull him back on to the kerb. I've heard the great man is prone to this sort of antic. So I almost lived through my own story. Spooky."

Richard Calder's first novel *Dead Girls* (HarperCollins hardback) has a Hans Bellmer cover described in advance as the #1 Surreal Porno Jacket of 1993. Apparently editor Malcolm Edwards hates it; all women hate it; the book club cancelled its order because of it. Meanwhile, the manager in charge of the HarperCollins paperback not only loathes and despises it but at last report had begun to suspect that such a jolly striking cover image must be worth re-using.

Maxim Jakubowski has led a life of crime and gloatingly carried off both glittering prizes named after Anthony Boucher: the nonfiction Anthony award (crime's equivalent of the Hugo) for his *100 Great Detectives*, and the right to hold Bouchercon 25, the 1995 World Mystery Convention, in Nottingham. "So, what with Glasgow and sf, both big worldcons come to the UK in '95" American fans of both genres are pondering glumly on the long gap between

August's sf event and the crime fiesta in October. (Bouchercon 22 enquiries to Broadway Media Centre, 14 Broad Street, Nottingham, NG1 3AL.)

Fritz Leiber's funeral was a "totally Fritzcan" event, according to my Californian mole Don Herron: "If Jay Sheckley had limited herself to her opening remarks about reclaiming Fritz for horror and then just gone over and kissed the corpse in the open casket, throwing back her black veil and leaning over Dracula-like... maybe it would have been in questionable taste, but at least it would have been short. She had to be ordered off stage after the first story she wanted to read. And she can't read for shit. As my and Fritz's pal John Law said to me somewhere during the almost-two-hour affair, 'Hey, Don, could you get me a spot on the programme? I'd like to read *A Spectre is Haunting Texas*.' So Sheckley did the corpse kiss after it was all over and almost no one was watching. Werewolf Mike put a cigarette in Fritz's hand and someone else a champagne glass for his last party (I don't think he would have objected for a second — though I hear Charlie Brown of *Locus* had big trouble with the open coffin). Poul & Karen Anderson, Judith Merril and Diana Paxson spoke. John de Cles gave a brilliant (and short) valediction. And Justin Leiber's reading of Fritz's 'The Big Trek' from the mezzanine of the *fin de siècle* columbarium where the services took place was nothing short of magisterial (and the story selection could not have been better, if you knew Fritz)."

Ian Watson has just two things to say about his new book *Space Marine* — that it isn't at all like *Starship Troopers*, and that it introduces a whole new sf art-form... scrimshaw on the finger bones of one's dead comrades. Sounds better than karaoke.

Infinitely Improbable

Court Circular: as I write, the literary world awaits a hot legal battle between Games Workshop (with their new publisher Boxtree) and Transworld, owing to the latter's publication of a series of "young adult skiffy" novels labelled *Dork Future*. This also happens to be the trademarked name of a GW game, and the mere fact that the product had apparently been discontinued did not prevent GW from getting Very Annoyed Indeed.

Yet More of the SF Encyclopaedia: all seems to be finished, despite wicked John Clute's attempts to induce heart attacks with a last-minute fax claiming that all the countless "chap" (chapbook publication) references must urgently be changed to "pyg," standing for and cross-referencing to "Pygmalion," which would be the new title of the "Supermen" theme article, which... He barely escaped with his life. Meanwhile, putative US publishers Bantam decided to drop the Encyclopaedia as part of their desperate trimming (they hadn't signed a contract). Optimists on the team hope for a better deal from one of the other hungry-eyed New York editors who are closing in.

Those London Pub Meetings have settled down at the Hamilton Hall bar on Liverpool Street Station (upper level) on the first Thursday each month. Be warned that this event consists of countless sf fans plus a few authors drinking and chatting; it is not, for example, a writers' workshop teaching the closely guarded secrets of making it into *Interzone*.

R.I.P. January 1993 sees the 20th-anniversary — and final — issue of Doug Frazz's American sf critical magazine *Quantum* (called *I hrust* until he found this made retailers put it well out of children's reach), which received five Hugo nominations. Frazz is to become an associate editor of *Science Fiction Eye*.

How To Sell Books. Which paperback publisher refused sf dealers' requests for early copies of a November 1992 sf anthology (for informal launch at the Novacon convention), because "they haven't been printed yet"... while review copies were already in the mail? "One is contending with active sabotage," muttered an anthology editor.

World Fantasy Award: this year's Best Novel trophy went to Robert McCammon for *Boy's Life*.

668: *The Neighbour of the Beast*. This was Neil Gaiman's and Terry Pratchett's planned title for a sequel to *Good Omens* (if ever), but too late — it's been snaffled and has appeared from Ace in the USA, a horror/humour novel by one "Lionel Fenn," said to be really Charles L. Grant. I was particularly taken by the atmospheric and horrific location of the book's "decaying mansion at number 668 Langford Place."



Exogamy Dentata

John Clute

It would be nice to think we already knew the truth about the death of sf, and to speak of other things. It would be immensely calming, for instance – because the tale is so smooth and round and fully packed – to speak nothing but sage praise of Robert Charles Wilson's *The Harvest* (Bantam Books, \$23), saying What a good read are you! But (it is the curse of Adam) we cannot do so, because *The Harvest* is not only a good read, it is a tocsin. It may be as smooth as the mothering ice before the skate, but when you put your ear to what it says a tinnitus of aftermath sings you down, a voice from chill Canada in cold waters.

What you are hearing is requiescat. What you are being told (what Robert Charles Wilson is confirming from the Pacific Rim of Canada to which he moved) is that genre sf, and the elevator shoes it stood on to peer into the platform of the future, has become an afterimage in the mind's eye: a relic of another time: an echo staffed by golems in the fields of sharecrop, doing good lunch with dinosaurs: because Western Civilization's perception of Time's Arrow, over the course of the 20th century, has changed almost totally. What we once saw as a River flowing futurewards through a stepped landscape, we now see as a Delta, where salt and fresh streams exchange their juices in the night, islands of repose appear and disappear, creole banter mocks our tongue, and we do not know where to stand on Now, or how to live on the steel beach Tomorrow. It has been a sea-change of great profundity, a systemic disordering, a change of perception through which the sf we once knew seems about as predictive as Neville Chamberlain, or Andy Hardy.

Genre sf now looks back (in the popular phrase) to the future. It has become a formal exercise, through which it has become all too terribly easy to encode a refusal of the next day, while pretending to command it. Some novels which sound like genre sf – like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1992) – very nearly (and in this case very bravely) transcend rancour and belatedness through the ardour of their claim to tell stories we can climb to, up the tightrope to a new world. Wiser – or maybe less brave writers like Kim Newman dance shy of the future altogether; the alternate histories of Kim

Newman are profoundly unscience-fictional in the old sense, because they are anecdotes of eternal return, cycles into the foxhole of the past. They appeal to us (they assuredly appeal to me) because they seem so very contemporary. Sf today has its back turned.

Indeed, for the guys who wrote the old sf, Cyberpunk must seem just another word for *vagina dentata*. 1993 must seem a terribly female world to the dreamers of genre, this musky delta of the fresh and the salt, this pathless peneplain so utterly baffling to elevator shoes, where the frontier has become a levee, and the levee a rune. It is no wonder, perhaps, that there is so much Canadian sf around these days. Cyberpunk itself – or at any rate the Cyberpunk tendency exemplified by the work of William Gibson, who lives not too far from Robert Charles Wilson – is a deeply Canadian response to the new world. Canadian sf has never been a literature of frontier; its heroes (the protagonists of A.E. Van Vogt, the lonely supermen of Gordon R. Dickson, Gibson's *Case*) do not crash through the barriers of the unknown, found empires, breed dynasties, like the Yankee heroes of E.E. Smith or Robert A. Heinlein or Larry Niven. The Canadians' route to power is transcendental. If they manage to escape from the Wilderness of the world, it is by becoming Elect (in the heart of cyberspace, *Case* finds something like nirvana) in one bound. And if they marry, they marry out.

Robert Charles Wilson's newest novel, *The Harvest*, is on all these counts a very Canadian book. We are in Pacific North West, in something like the present day. The human race is as we know it, and a background susurruus of distress gives signals that the planet is as we know it, as well. But from the first page we are in a condition of belatedness: as though the decisions that count had already been taken. This proves accurate, for the event which serves as the central triggering occasion of the novel – the arrival in Earth orbit of a vast ship bearing a collective sentience – has occurred just before the start of the tale. (Nothing could be more Canadian than that: to have the spring of action of a book exist as an *a priori* administrative *fait accompli*.)

Within a short period of time, the

sentience has infiltrated the entire human race with neocytes, molecule-sized quasi-mechanical devices or entities which, after they have thoroughly housed themselves, are poised to enact a kind of nano-transubstantiation on each human being. What this transubstantiation offers to each human being – as the sentience puts it through a planet-wide dream each individual human shares is immortality, wisdom, a slightly crepuscular calm that does not exclude passion and love as well, a quasi-cyberspace-like access to a near infinitude of data and praxis, a virtual-reality reconstruction of the planet within a vast spacecraft to be constructed by transfigured humans for their own purposes, and an infinity of space to wander in, learning all the while, in a dance of Being. It is the ultimate marriage offer, the ultimate chance of exogamy for the race.

In a genre sf novel of the old school, it is easy to guess what might happen: the offer would either turn out to be a snare, or the human race would divide into affectless (though immortal) sheep and quintessentially human singleton goats, whose mortality would somehow be both glorified and dodged. But Wilson is a contemporary writer, and a Canadian by choice, and in *The Harvest* only one in 10,000 says no to the chance to transcend the toxicity of our mortal coil, and to become Elect; and there is nothing in the course of the tale to hint that the 9,999 are wrong. The narrative itself – which concentrates on a small American coastal city, and on the handful of refusers who live there – makes it pretty clear, in fact, that it is those who have voted negatively whose motives are suspect, whose selfhoods are almost necessarily tainted or contorted or blocked. After all, what sane person could reject a chance to escape the downside of the human condition – this squalid quarrel of the mortal soul within the flesh, this bug in a bean of dying? Very very few, says the book; and examines – through the course of the tale it tells – a few examples.

Matt Wheeler, a doctor much in love with grief and with the feel of the physical world and with his home town, says no; as do a few others: a Christian; two teenagers sunk in self-despite and vandalism (another Canadian note, one is afraid); a couple of foetid hangers-on; and, in another part of the country, a nearly insane paedophile ex-Colonel who has spent the last several years liaising amongst his contacts in the military and intelligence community for the profit of favoured foreign states. We also spend time with the American President, who has said Yes, and undergo a vast typhoon, and eavesdrop occasionally on the Elect as they prepare to discard their bodies (although they are always free to do

flesh again, pro tem, for a moment or an aeon), and the plot moves with considerable cunning and great smoothness towards an elegiac close.

Unfortunately, Wilson's fatal flaw is an as yet unbreakable habit, whenever he reaches climax point, of humiliating his plots and his characters and his readers with utterly tedious writing-school hooks and tricks – once again drives him into a destructive sickness. The American president – this is one of the high moments of the tale – has commanded his neocytes to transform him into a younger self, into a twelve-year old Huck, who gets on his bicycle and lights out across an America almost totally abandoned by the savers of Yes. It may seem trite as described, but the short vision Wilson allows us of this return to the American Dream is radiant and assured and clean of heart. Then – and the trouble begins – Huck meets, by accident, Matt Wheeler and his fellow mortals, who are trekking eastwards (not a very American direction) to Ohio, where a small community of refusers is being founded. This is bad enough, but within a page we discover that the mad colonel has also come across Matt Wheeler and the gang, and has insinuated himself into command, and is about to corrupt them and do all sorts of Plot Stuff all over the remainder of the book, when all we wanted was to understand the gist of things and to pass onwards to the quietus of the last sentence: but now we've got to pretend to be alarmed at the threats that clever Mr Wilson has contrived, we've got to pretend to worry about Huck and Matt and the nice girl the colonel is about to violate in an unmanly way, we've got to pretend to believe this malarkey when all the while we could be dreaming of the great marriage outwards.

Fortunately, Wilson manages to extricate himself from his Habit before it is entirely too late, and the novel resumes its course downwards to the depths of iconoclasm: for it is, in the end, a tale which utterly refuses the sf it wears the clothes of; or, perhaps more productively, it might be said that *The Harvest* is an example – one of the clearest yet – of an sf genre which has begun to adapt itself to the futures which surround us, bearing cargo to the terrene.

Of the two extremely clever novel-length tales assembled by A.S. Byatt in *Angels and Insects* (Chatto & Windus, £14.99), who won the Booker Prize for *Possession* (1990), the second might seem to have some generic interest, being about ghosts and the language and behaviour of people in the 19th century who are embroiled in the supernatural; but this story, "The Conjugal Angel," seems unduly contorted for its content, and gives off

the wrought-iron infarct feel so often found in liftant attempts to acquire the gone. There is no cycling into the foxhole of the past in this story, nothing muggy with life, nor any impertinence.

But the first of Byatt's long tales, "Morpho Eugenia," is something else altogether. It is a perfect demonstration of the virtues of knowing too much or, to put it another way, it is a perfect exercise in doing what we can with the past, which is precisely to know it as an object of dissection, though it can't of course be lived. we cannot for the life of us truly re-inhabit the mind-set of the protagonist, William Adamson, an upwardly mobile biologist caught in the amber of the rural England of 1860, nor that of the master of the large country home to which he has come as a working visitor (he is fresh from the Amazon, and has survived a shipwreck in which a decade of zoological specimens was lost), nor that of the master's daughter, whose eventual marriage to the protagonist is a cover for ungovernable incest. But knowledge – and the forms and conventions of knowing – is what "Morpho Eugenia" is entirely, and with dizzying profusion of detail, shaped to anatomize.

Adamson (perhaps too coyly named), haunted by a decade spent naming and measuring the engorged profusion of the jungle and the great river, is almost as alien as we are; and his inveterate habit of observation leads him inexorably into perceptions of the great house and its serried inhabitants as comprising a society not dissimilar to the ant and termite societies his evolutionary theories have forced him to begin to understand as being blind of God, for there is no god in the 1860 of the tale, much though the master of the house longs to maintain arguments for a continuing deity. But Adamson's perceptions are partial, because – unlike Byatt, or her readers, or the protagonist of any modernist or post-modernist tale set in the present day – he does not conceive of himself as partaking in an artifice of Story. We, of course, know better. And it is the knowingness of the telling of Story that most allies Angels and Insects to the alternate histories of writers like (once again) Kim Newman (a review of *Anno Dracula* will appear in the next issue) in their foxhole homes.

The surface story of "Morpho Eugenia" is a 19th-century romance of family which gradually becomes explicit about material (Adamson's bride's incest with her brother) not in fact tellable in that century: Byatt tells this story as straightforwardly as possible, without mocking its diction or the underlying Victorian patter-song of excessive plot. the tale, at this level, is a quotation of a tale, a parody with love. At the same time, however, Byatt

lays a palimpsest of knowingly-timed analytical imagery over the "naïve" tale, the rhythms of which directly and unmistakeably invoke Ivy Compton-Burnett's grand guignol transformations of the Victorian romance of family into barbaric family romance. But Compton-Burnett worked her transformations out of personal anguish, personal knowledge of the termitarium of the Victorian family: Byatt, and her readers, can only know that life through art. So the tale, at this level, is a quotation of a tale which itself is a ransacking of the original tale.

It is through this laying-on of levels of quotation that we understand the knowingness of the text we read; and understand that we are meant simultaneously to understand, and perhaps to embrace, each intersecting level. We are meant, in other words, to know it all before we even start. As an example, take the incest. We are meant to know that the original tale is innocent of suspicion when, on the third page of the story, Adamson (himself innocent of the implications) notices that Eugenia and her brother Edgar dance well together. We are also meant to know that the Ivy Compton-Burnett level of the telling, at this point, has introduced a dreadful suspicion. But first and finally, we are meant immediately to know – because it is half a century later than the prime of Compton-Burnett, and the tale has (as it were) been told – that the suspicion is just. Every one of the 160 pages of the story enforces a similar tripleness of vision. It is as though the book were telepathic to itself. Unlike alternate-history novels, it pays dues to the original story. Like them, it is a kind of virtual-reality game. Like them, it is a foxhole for the millennium.

Notes.

N Only You Can Save Mankind (Doubleday, £9.99) by Terry Pratchett, and Dinosaur Junction (Orchard Books, £4.99: a hardback was announced, but was not seen by this reviewer) by Gwyneth Jones writing as Ann Halam, are juveniles, both set in the present day. In other words, they are tales of children who have to live here. Pratchett's hero, Johnny, child of a marriage about to dissolve, finds himself within the virtual reality of a computer wargame, and comes to understand that his opponents – rather like the Buggers in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) – are both real and innocent of any wish to invade Earth. A dance of moral choices, and some neat action, ensues. There are jokes, and an underlying melancholy, because the frame of the tale is the world, not a Turtle. (It is understood there will be a sequel.)

Halam's hero, Ben, rather younger than Johnny and dominated by his singularly well-conceived older sister, is

obsessed by fossils, and while searching for dinosaur relics finds what may be (it probably is) a timeslip backwards to a primal sea, where the oppressions of contemporary life come to a head, are sorted out, relieved for a moment. There is a stunning portrait, en passant, of a brilliant harum-scarum bad-tempered bachelor scientist who lives alone, and who in almost any previous children's book would glow like Merlin, save the bacon, become a beloved icon. Not here, not Gwyneth Jones, not now. *Dinosaur Junction* earns every calory of warmth it does finally, guardedly, at the end, share out.

Mostly Harmless (Heinemann, £13.99) by Douglas Adams, which is the fifth volume of the *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy, continues to poison the well of humour. Like the slow drip of water in a shut cave, the jokes make small, exquisitely timed tinkles in the blackness beneath, but the blackness is rising, and the room for echoes lessens with each new joke; the water comes closer and closer to the savage rock roof, and the last bit of air is gone just before the end, the wiping out of another version of the planet, and black death for all: all drowned, drowned out of the book. It is, indeed, very funny, of course. Ford Prefect, and Arthur Dent, and most of the cast of the preceding volumes, all caper through a few more adventures: but they have been drowning from the first page on, and they know it, we know it, Douglas Adams knows it. And this may really be the end of *Hitch Hiker*. Vale. This time, I think there may be no antidote.

As many readers of *Interzone* may know, the Science Fiction Foundation, which was founded 20 years ago, and which is now the premier English-language research resource in sf studies outside of North America, has been evicted by the Polytechnic of East London, which now calls itself the University of East London, perhaps in celebration. Fortunately for all of us who care a damn, the University of Liverpool has jumped at the chance to obtain the research resource and gain the prestige of housing the SFF, and the library will be moving north in early 1993. An Administrator (what they now call the University of East London froze that position in 1980) will be appointed; and courses in sf (frozen ditto) will again be taught.

In late 1992, *Foundation: The Journal of Science Fiction* left the University of East London, no longer advertises that institution in any fashion, and is being produced separately by the same scholars as before. As an example of the kind of material to be found in the journal, it is easy to recommend **The Profession of Science Fiction: SF Writers on their Craft and Ideas** (Macmillan, £35 hb; £12.99 pb).

edited by Maxim Jakubowski and Edward James. It is a selection of autobiographical essays by sf writers, originally published between 1972 and 1990; most are substantial, and most are witty. Most of the authors are central to the genre. It is the sort of book the University of East London had no desire to associate itself with, and can therefore be recommended without reservation.

(John Clute)

Fantasies of History

Mary Gentle

Fantasy and science fiction deal with history in idiosyncratic ways.

It seems obvious at first that reactions to Lisa Goldstein's **Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon** (Tor, \$19.95) will vary in direct proportion to how much the reader knows about the late Elizabethan period. The book has two plot strands, one (the male) is historically famous: the playwright and spy Christopher Marlowe. The other (female) is unknown to history: a no-longer young bookseller's widow by name of Alice Wood. This appears to set up expectations of historical veracity and real magicism.

In this Elizabethan London, unknown to its inhabitants, a war is going on. Kit Marlowe pursues pretty men, and espionage and literature: the two latter worlds not so far apart, given how inflammatory plays, pamphlets and poems could be in the 1590s. At the retail end of the scale, Alice Wood has taken over her husband's book selling business in St Paul's Churchyard despite the Stationers Company's objections to women. She has a missing son. It is Alice's son, her seer friend, and the other pamphleteers who will uncover the truth of what is going on in this time of plague. The Faerie Queen and King are fighting their battles in London, and there are rumours of Arthur, and a little changeling boy...

Marlowe is duly drawn into the meretricious court nobility, where magic and assassination hide behind the tapestry hangings, to find where mortal and Faerie conspiracy meet. A little mild sexism is stirred in to acknowledge that this is the Elizabethan Age, and the Stationers Company are duly duped into believing that Alice is a witch. Complexities of attitudes to women in the 1590s from Stubbes' *Anatomy of Abuses* to the suggestion that girls ought to be educated in Grammar Schools are not addressed. Nor does Goldstein's apologetically gay Kit Marlowe seem

capable of exclaiming, loudly, that all who love not boys and tobacco are fools. Unkindly, one could take this as being the American genre-fantasy view of Elizabethan history: ruffs and breeches and a few *Midsummer Night's Dream* trappings.

There are systematically odd omissions for a novel which concerns itself with alchemical symbolism and an alchemical resolution. There is no mention of Doctor John Dee, the astrologer, spy, scientist and diplomat whom Elizabeth I wisely cherished. Nor any mention of the Italian Giordano Bruno, who wrote and spoke so convincingly of alchemy and Hermetic science that the Catholic Church burned him. Or of Walter Raleigh and the School of Night. Are we intended to think this an alternate history – or did anything contentious just get left out of the world-picture?

However, Goldstein's epigraph, quoting from Thomas Nashe, speaks of "a company of ragged knaves" (as, one suspects, all writers like to see themselves) who "dream'd strange devices of the sun and moon." So perhaps this novel is only a dream of the 1590s, and the elimination of absolutely all contentious souls who would have had an interest in Elizabethan magical politics is the prerogative of a fantasia. Their absence, it's true, means the absence of deep alchemy, of Catholic and Protestant fanaticism of real state brutality and leaves *Sun and Moon* as a pleasant fantasy of reconciliation, interrupted only by cardboard bad dies.

Further along in history, in near-past fantasy, Freda Warrington's **A Taste of Blood Wine** (Pan, £8.99) moves with the speed of a striking slug for the first 200 pages, but after that (and it runs to 446pp) begins to boogie.

The first half is slow because it is covers territory covered before in other vampire novels. An ordinary family, in this case an upper-middle-class 1923 domicile of a scientist/academic and his three daughters, is intruded upon and captivated by a beautiful and dangerous stranger. Said stranger is Karl von Wultendorf, a vampire of multisexual attractiveness. Captivated most of all is 19 year-old Charlotte, professional daughter, envious of her married sister and her other, flapper sister, but terminally socially handicapped by shyness. One spends most of the first part of *A Taste of Blood Wine* recognizing the standard adolescent identification figure, and wanting to give her a good kick. And wanting to hurry the plot along: it's inevitable that, despite her brother in law's shell-shocked friend screaming when he sees Karl and identifying him as a vampire, that Karl and Charlotte are going to get together. And then what?

The then-what is the interesting

part. Is Charlotte in a state of obsessive love, or only a victim of vampire glamour? Karl's appetites in sex include feeding, but the feeding of the vampire drives the drained human mad; can he restrain himself? How do two members of different species make a relationship, especially when one is two or three hundred years old, and not likely to die by any known means, and the other is mortal? The progress by which Charlotte moves away from social morality and into her own self is fascinating. The choice hanging over her at last is to risk becoming a vampire (one may die, and not make the transition), and risk losing Karl (love may not survive the process), or remain human and certain of love.

The novel, however, is not merely about human society. A lot more of the text is devoted to vampire society and predator morality. And, it has to be said, about repressed gay vampires. The other half of Karl's life is a long process of escape from and domination by Kristian, the autocratic vampire who first took Karl into that world from Mozart's age. Kristian has his band of vampire offspring, whom he torments, loves, and controls; he has his castle in Germany; he has his ties of spirit and blood that operate emotionally on the level of sex. Karl is subtextually in the position of a man giving up his older male lover for a younger and female lover. There seems no real reason for the novel not to foreground this – to ignore it, in the way it does.

A Taste of Blood Wine has some nice touches that almost work – we first come across the vampires wandering through the trenches of World War One, preying on the dying. The vampire's indifference to human suffering is well done, but the human suffering is just not there with, say, the same ring as Middlebrook's *The First Day on the Somme*. The other dimension that vampires travel through, the Crystal Ring, and its association with both sex and the theory of physics is potentially interesting, but achieves more landscape than philosophy. And the book has been left open for a sequel, but what is there left to say about human-vampire relations?

Raymond Feist's *The King's Buccaneer* (Doubleday, \$20; HarperCollins, £15.99) is unexpectedly cheering: an American genre fantasy that doesn't pretend to owe anything to history or possibility, and has as its progenitor those black-and-white Basil Rathbone and Errol Flynn pirate movies of the 1930s.

Although a sequel in the "Riftwar" series that began with *Magician* (1982), *The King's Buccaneer* can be read on its own. Nicholas is the youngest, crippled, over-protected son of Prince Arutha of Krondor. His father sends him and his squire to Castle Crydee to

gain experience of responsibility. No sooner is he there, in love, and working hard for the first time in his life, than the town is attacked by slavers who are Not All They Seem. Together with experienced mentors – a crusty Admiral who is an ex-pirate; a mercenary; and his royal cousin – Nicholas sets off across an unknown sea after his captured lady love. As usual, he alone knows something significant; in this case the secret passed down from royal father to son about who is really behind the magical shenanigans. Cue stout sailors, pirate molls, scuffles and top-gallants, and ho!

Having said that, Nicholas doesn't spend half enough time at sea to make this a real pirate movie.

The King's Buccaneer is utterly unashamed of its filmic template, providing the reader with all the familiar Adventure roles – the young and crippled male protagonist, a prince who must learn to be a Man. The hero's best friend, bluff and rumbustious Harry (son of minor nobility). Paired girls for them to fall for, fiery Margaret (who would have been played by Maureen O'Hara) and wet-as-dishwater Abigail. A roguish Admiral. Batshit magicians. A town full of pirates. There's a mercenary who I swear is being played by Sean Connery (now), and a villain who ought to be played by Christopher Lee (then). There is a streetwise female urchin, and a spoilt princess, both of whom turn out satisfactorily to not quite be what we expected – but, since this is comfortable Adventure just barely updated to the 1990s, not too different either.

It is fair to say that you get the 1930s attitudes that you expect, watered down and more (or less) successfully fixed for the present climate. There is a regrettable uncomic Hindu. There are some hand springs performed so that we can have the kidnapped-girls-must-be-chased plot, and still have modern do-it-all wimmin as heroines – Margaret organizes all the other slave captives to within an inch of their lives (Duke's daughter, y'see; breedin' always tells), and informs Abigail continually what a wanker she is for moping about. The scenes with the spoilt princess come too close to spanking movies for comfort before defusing the effect.

Oh, and there's a deadly race of snake-priests in there too, who have strayed in from b&w 1930s sf, but I wouldn't worry about them if I were you. They're necessary for the plot, but they're no longer allowed to be gloating villains.

The King's Buccaneer's one really false note is Nicholas's crippled foot. He can make this better if he really wants to. No, honest. He can. The reason no doctor can heal him is because he is stopping them. All he has to do is eradicate his character

problems, grow up and be a man, and his birth defect will clear up like acne. And it does.

So I wonder how it feels for a disabled reader to be told that your disability reflects your inner psychological failings, and that you would be able to heal it if you were a better person. So what does that make you if you don't? If you can't?

Ask Richard III, and the next person you meet in a wheelchair.

Near-future history is still history. At first sight, D.G. Compton's *Nomansland* (Gollancz, £15.99) has the appearance of a book that is asking for it. It's a book by a man, with a female scientist/mother protagonist. It's a novel set in a world where no more male children are being born, but female children are. Guess which is the valuable sex? This is going to be another they-can't-do-without-us, let's-bash-the-wimmin dystopian diatribe, isn't it?

Not quite. There is some interesting stuff going on in here that you wouldn't have got if a right-on had written it. A brief analysis is not easy.

Nomansland is a near-future thriller, set in a 21st century where an HIV-type virus has made it impossible for male children to be conceived or carried to term. Sperm banks exist, but can only provide female offspring. The main action takes place some 40 years after the event, referred to as "the Attrition." All men are therefore over forty. All men are, it transpires, even more in charge than they were in the 1990s; women being admitted to all professions – science, the army – but kept in the lower ranks. One thinks at this point, oh come on! We have an all-female society being born for four decades and the sexist men are still in charge?

But, on the other hand, what a threatened group generally does is clamp down and become even more repressive. Plausible.

The novel is set in a unnamed country that feels partly English, partly Scandinavian. It follows one family, in particular the daughter Harriet Ryder, born just under 40 years ago, who has dedicated her life and career to finding a cure for the Attrition. Leapfrogging backwards and forwards between the present and family history, we see her father commit suicide because he is hen-pecked (!), her mother become a religious nutter, and her brother Daniel become a squaddie and repressed homosexual.

It would be easy to decry this as wimmin-bashing, except that in many cases *Nomansland* simply tells it as it is – as it is in the 1990s, admittedly. When the father, before his suicide, drunkenly apologizes to his contemptuous son for never standing up to his wife (and his son doesn't want to hear

it), this is tragic, and above all stupid, but it is nonetheless how some people think. When Harriet adores her brat-brother instead of wanting to strangle him, and devotes her life to bringing back boy-babies so she can possibly have one in addition to her daughter, this also is not right-on, but it is also how some people think. What bothers me is, finally, the novel's supposition that it is how all people think.

Harriet Ryder's research programme has, after decades, succeeded in finding a way to produce male children (she thinks). Summoned by a high-up Civil Servant, she is warned by him to delay publication. Attempts to publish bring threats, violence, the knowledge that traitors and industrial spies are flocking around, and finally a kidnapping. At the same time, a serial killer is killing women, and the world is in much the same kind of mess as it was in the 20th century. As a thriller, as science fiction about scientists doing research, and scientists as human beings, *Nomansland* is a good read.

Problems? Harriet Ryder, for one. She behaves in the early part of the novel as a weak, husband-dependant soul so convincingly that when she announces on page 88 that "I'd come out of my fugue. I was no longer only-a-poor-weak-women, shocked and biddable," it comes as a matter for disbelief as we haven't seen her being anything else. It may be a narrative structural problem. It may not. Daniel, for example, is not a likable character, woman-hating and belligerent, but he is a self-consistant, convincing young male who manages to be oddly sympathetic. Women in *Nomansland* remain problematical and don't get to be sympathetic. The women who don't want babies are either psychopaths, like the police heavy who threatens Harriet Ryder into suppressing the results of her research, by cutting Harriet's cat's throat on the living room carpet; or they are pathetically unfulfilled maiden aunts, like Harriet's ex-co-parent of her daughter Anna. And yet that isn't quite true: all these characters are, if not 3D, at least 2D.

As for sex, in a world of men over 40 you would think honest joyful dycery, as well as co-parenting between women for convenience, would spread like wildfire, but no; in *Nomansland* they're all doing it, but they're not enjoying it. There would be straight women who would co-parent with women, take women as lovers, even, but not like it. But where are the happy lesbians? Where, indeed.

And where are the women, majority or minority, white or ethnic, who would say, To hell with this, let's carry on without men! They don't seem to be there either. *Nomansland* is all the more frustrating because it can do a large part of women's experience very well, but what it leaves out is, ultimately, vital.

At the far end of the historical spectrum is Stephen Baxter's *Timelike Infinity* (HarperCollins, £14.99), an attempt to mix high science, moral complexity, and pulp sf. It begins in the near(ish) future. Michael Poole is discovered doing research out in the Oort Cloud by a Virtual of his father. The Virtual, Harry, is autonomous enough to converse with him; and due to taking anti-senescence treatments and brainwipes, appears younger than his son. Everything in this novel plays with paradoxes of time. Harry is summoning Michael back to the orbit of Jupiter and the magnificent project he abandoned: the wormhole/gate that will enable time travel 1,500 years into the future.

The time is 1,500 years later. Jasoft Parz is a human diplomat, ambassador and quisling to the Qax, the alien race that has enslaved humanity. As he and his Qax master watch the wormhole open, and the vessel from the past arrive, a fleeing ship blasts off from Earth and vanishes into the gate humans calling themselves the Friends of Wigner, escaping, attempting to prevent the Qax invasion before it happens.

The time is 1,500 years after the Qax invasion...

Timelike Infinity is a quantum physics novel structured around Wigner's Paradox; Wigner's Paradox goes one better than Shroedinger's Cat. In the normal theory, the opening of Shroedinger's box collapses the wave-front of possibilities so that the cat inside it either is or is not dead. But supposing a friend opens the box first? A subsystem appears that is box-cat-friend, still unknown to Shroedinger – as far as he's concerned the wave front hasn't collapsed and everything is still in a state of the possible. Then suppose another friend...

You get the picture. Infinite regression of possibility. Or is it? *Timelike Infinity* plays with this up to the hilt, in a Stapledonian immensity of histories. One forgives the novel its limitations with sexual interaction. Michael Poole is an irascible old man attempting to deal with the arriving rebels, his ex-lover, and a chunk of Stonehenge orbiting Jupiter. Jasoft Parz is a jaded old man still curious about the strange life-form that is the Qax, and regretting humanity's enslavement. Neither has much of a sex life. There are two female characters, Miriam Berg, Poole's ex lover and capable spacer; and Shira of the Friends, a bald woman who cries out to be played by Sigourney Weaver in the movie. There are neat aliens, good plot-reversals, much hand-waving with physics and a pretty damn cosmic ending. I didn't think they were writing them like this any more.

Timelike Infinity has a line that incorporates what may be the guiding

motto of science fiction: "In case of emergency break laws of physics." Whether *Timelike Infinity* does that, or speculates legitimately with the hard physics currently available, would take a more scientifically literate reviewer to tell you. It sounds convincing. That's what it's meant to do. Hold on for the ride.

(Mary Gentle)

Kryptonite (with a Vowel Shift)

Wendy Bradley

I'm sorry but I just can't take kryptonite caterpillars.

Yes, I'm talking about you, Timothy Zahn, and your latest Star Wars episode, *Dark Force Rising* (Bantam, £9.99) – and I hope you are ashamed of yourself! This is a book, gentle reader, with no plot development, no character development and which doesn't even make decent use of the cute bits we can all quote. Yea, yea, so Leia's pregnant with Force-filled twins but she still wanders around saving the universe with nary a twinge of a symptom. (Including hiding in a closet for a couple of hours – does this man not know about the intimate connection between the uterus and the bladder? I was crossing my legs for a good page and a half.) There's a bad Jedi, a megalomaniac warlord, some politics, some pirates and a lot of people trying to kidnap Leia and Luke for flimsy reasons and ignoring Han's Lois Lane relationship with them both. And there are kryptonite caterpillars that hang in the trees and suck up the Force. Get this, though, no one knows why they should have evolved this ability. Spooky, huh? If Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher and Mark Hamill are ever so broke that they film this turkey I will, personally, eat my wordprocessor. With fries.

The kryptonite in the latest Weis and Hickman epic *Serpent Mage* (The Death Gate Cycle volume 4; Bantam, £14.99) comes in the form of seawater – which is a bit of a poser for the magic workers since we have made it to the fourth world, the wet one. The villain/hero, Haplo, who is tattooed from head to foot with magic sigla, gets wet and, ping!, no more sigla, no more magic. When he dries out, his sigla and his powers reappear. Wet kryptonite wow, so Ford Prefect was right, you really do need to know where your towel is!

Actually this is another of the worlds in the Death Gate universe that I had a great deal of trouble visualizing. It is the water world, right, so it basically consists of a universe-sized drop of

seawater. The elves, dwarves and people live on spherical islands that have bubbles of air round them (although they can all breathe underwater anyway). The sun is, er, down at the bottom of the sea and there is one almost descriptive bit where we are asked to consider the pearly light that comes up from the sun through the water. Well yes, but what does it look like when a boat sails from one island to another? What about sense of direction which way is "up"? We get a bit further forward in the "what the hell happened to weird up the universe like this" plot, but not much.

David Eddings plays much fairer with his readers in *Domes of Fire* (HarperCollins, £14.99). This is set in the Elenium world, a few years later and mostly on the next-door continent, but Eddings' hero Sparhawk has to cope with the superheroes and supervillains OK OK, Eddings calls them gods but we all know what they are without his kryptonite ring which he spent the previous trilogy trying to dispose of. Fortunately he didn't Frodo it into the Cracks of Doom but just left it lying around in the cosmic equivalent of the Great River, so with the aid of the sickly sweet child goddess currently masquerading as his daughter he will no doubt retrieve it in volume two. This is the third Eddings I've read and in spite of the creaking awfulness of some of the plotting I think I'm hooked – does anyone know a cure?

In *The Silver Hand* (Song of Albion, Book 2) by Stephen Lawhead (Lion, £13.99) Lawhead changes the viewpoint character so that we are no longer seeing Albion – the ancient Celtic kingdoms of Britain – through the eyes of a visitor from this world but through the eyes (and, later, after he is blinded, through the insight) of the bard Tegid. This means that the novel loses the freshness of the first volume and becomes run-of-the-mill black hats white hats as Tegid has no grasp of the mentality of the 20th-century characters who take the lead in this story, Llew (goodie) and Siawn Hy (baddie).

The female characters are appallingly underdrawn, particularly Scatha, the doughty woman who runs a famous school for warriors and yet appears to take the rape of her three daughters and murder of two of them a little more lightly than one would envisage. There is also a disposable character called Ffand, a young girl who rescues Llew and Tegid from prison early in the plot. Apparently (although I cannot remember her offhand and I certainly don't care enough to research) she was in the first novel and somehow became lumbered with looking after Llew's dog Twrch – she appears in one brief scene to do the necessary early rescuing, and is then filed under "wait here" until a brief

scene at the end so that someone they know can be horribly murdered without inconveniencing the plot. And the kryptonite factor? Here it operates in reverse: Llew magically "cures" the curse which has poisoned the entire water supply. This is the weakness of seeing the plot from the Tegid viewpoint: you wonder why the 20th-century characters don't think of 20th-century remedies Personally I would have tried filtration and boiling first.

(Wendy Bradley)

Diabolic Conjuration

Chris Gilmore

The winner of the Bookshelf Collancz First Fantasy competition (already being referred to as "The Brooker Prize") ought, one feels, to be some sort of odd fish – at the very least a new talent launched on the world, brilliant, coruscating and individual.

A Dangerous Energy by John Whitbourn (Gollancz, £14.99), with its corrupt, repressive and technically backward Catholic church, evokes immediate memories of *Pavane* and *The Alteration*, though Whitbourn's alternate careers for well known people are less ingenious than Amis's. There's also a curious synchronicity: *A Dangerous Energy*, McDonald's *Hearts Hands and Voices* and Gentle's *The Architecture of Desire* must all have been in progress at the same time, yet all use the same joke about severed heads being forced to recite the crimes wherefore they were separated from their bodies, this being a world imbued with thaumaturgy.

It's a carefully visualized world, with believable economics (not essential, but always a good sign) and a leisurely pace. Even minor characters whom Whitbourn intends shortly to kill are introduced with a full set of antecedents, which reflect their environment and that of Tobias Oakley, his "hero." Good, but he isn't a man to use one word when four or five will serve. I mean this literally: "despite the fact that" (although) and "not only that but also" (moreover) are favourites of his. Perhaps as publishers employ fewer editors, they can afford more wordss. He also betrays a beginner's lack of confidence by explaining the development of his character to the reader, rather spoiling the effect of making it implicit in the action.

I mention these defects early, partly to get them out of the way but mainly because they are so glaring and so unnecessary. Underneath the naff verbiage, gratuitous summaries, layered adverbs and general fustian there's a

fine, dry style struggling to come into its own. The effect is rather as if someone had dropped a handful of powdered clay into a quart of clear spring water, but you can't put a book on one side to settle.

It's a pity, because Whitbourn has a number of rare virtues. His narrative, the biography of an evil magician who might have been a better and a happier man, never loses interest; his minor characters are meticulously visualized and consistent with their context; above all, he brings an overwhelming conviction to his creation. This is especially noticeable in his scenes of diabolic conjuration, which are fit to stand beside those in *Black Easter* and "Green Magic." The mood and outcome recall both, though the consecrated warrior-priest Tobias becomes in the end a far darker figure than the black mage Theron Ware.

A Dangerous Energy is very much a moral tale, having to do with sowing and reaping. Tobias becomes his own actions, and as these diverge, first from the humane, ultimately from the human, so he becomes his own punishment – a monster of loneliness, without even the capacity for further sin. Sin is a human vice, and can take place only in a universe where human virtue is possible. In the ultimate solipsism which Tobias imposes on himself, neither vice nor virtue has meaning or potential.

The further I read in *A Dangerous Energy*, the more I was convinced of the author's potential, and the more I was puzzled by the general effect. The control of pace and atmosphere, the use of flash-forward to heighten suspense, the evenness of texture, the careful placement of the setpiece scenes – these all display the skills of a master; yet the defects are those of a tyro, and pervade the narrative, descriptive and reflective passages (though not the dialogue). The effect is not one of commonplace lazy editing, but as if a very accomplished book had been deliberately marred. Fortunately, and for that reason, they're generally of the sort that any competent copy-editor can correct on the automatic pilot, dropping half a line here, reworking half a sentence there. Gollancz would do very well to employ one before the paperback comes out, though it'll be rather hard cheese on whoever buys the first edition.

(Chris Gilmore)

Why not take out a subscription to *Interzone* as a gift to a relative or friend?

Great Expectations

Jones & McIntosh

First off and briefly, for those who don't remember the story so far: Once upon a time there was a very influential sf magazine called *New Worlds*, edited by Michael Moorcock, which ceased publication amidst much mourning. A decade on, enter David Garnett, editor of the recently demised (and similarly mourned – at least by us) *Zenith* anthologies, and Gollancz. *New Worlds* is revived as an original anthology with Garnett as editor and Moorcock as consultant editor. Volume one appears in September 1991, twelve years after the death of its much venerated ancestor – and is (a) very good indeed, and (b) as much (if not more) a continuation of *Zenith* as the Moorcock magazine. Now to *New Worlds 2* (Gollancz, £5.99), of which neither (a) nor (b) above is true.

As you'd expect from David Garnett, there are a few good stories here. The best is the lead in the collection, Ian McDonald's "Innocents," a dark and exotic tale told in his trademark high-gloss prose, in which the genetically recycled dead are brought back to service the desires of the living. The second story in the book is also strong – Paul Di Filippo's "Brain Wars," a future war story which is both witty and chilling at the same time. Then there's "Virtually Lucid Lucy," as inventive a cocktail of dreams, computers and virtual reality as you'd expect from Ian Watson.

Also on the plus side if more conventional are stories from fast up-and-coming writer Peter F. Hamilton and newcomer Jack Deighton: Hamilton's "Candy Buds" suffers from a somewhat stereotyped plot (empire-building despot discovers the long-lost daughter who is to prove his ultimate undoing), but works because some very fluid writing makes it a genuinely enjoyable read, while Deighton's "The Face of the Water's" mixes sf romanticism sailing the canals of Mars with science impressive enough to deliver a truly convincing picture of life on the newly colonized planet.

All right so far, although there's only one story – the McDonald – that matches the (admittedly very) high points of the previous Garnett volumes. But there are also the stories that don't quite come off, this time rather more of them than we'd bargained for. Mark Laidlaw's story-as-dictionary-entries "Great Breakthroughs in Darkness" is over-ambitious and best described as anaesthetic. Exactly the same word sums up Stephen Baxter's

"Inherit the Earth," all about Catholicism amongst the aliens in the very far future. And there's also an extremely impenetrable Brian Aldiss story.

But there's worse to come. "Bruised Time" by Simon Ings is the latest instalment in the Jerry Cornelius saga, with Ings himself presumably making an appearance, and it's dull stuff. If the Ings wasn't bad enough, we get Warwick Colvin Jr, the "nephew" of a certain James Colvin, a long extinct pseudonym of a one-time editor of the magazine. Colvin Jr offers us "Corsairs of the Second Ether," a spoof Doc Smith-style space opera scattered in segments through the book, which seems to occupy much more space than its grand total of 26 pages. It's skilful enough pastiche, as well as an in-joke for chums-of-*New Worlds* that wears all too thin after the first few lines. Apart from the chums, though, it's hard to conjure a reason for anyone to read this

especially if they're expected to pay for the privilege. Each segment, including the last, concludes with the dread line: "To be continued." We sincerely hope not.

To complete the picture, besides an introduction by Garnett, an afterword by Moorcock, and an entertaining non-fiction piece by David Langford, we also have "Joe Protagoras is Alive and Living on Earth" and "The Name of the Game is Death," both by Philip K. Dick. Not stories found amongst Dick's papers, but novel outlines. Interesting enough, even entertaining in a nostalgic way – but still, stories they ain't.

In the final analysis, what really sinks this collection is an accumulation of things: Yes, there are too many stories that don't deliver, plus a couple of real stinkers; the Dick material, worthwhile in itself, crowds out a story – and what finally tips the balance is that, with the possible exception of the McDonald, the handful of standout stories we'd come to expect from Garnett just aren't in here.

Despite this, three out of four first-rate anthologies is still a damned good track record. So let's hope that this one turns out to be the exception to the *Zenith*/NW standard David Garnett has established, and – roll on *New Worlds 3*. (Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

Aldiss, Brian. *Home Life with Cats*. Illustrated by Karen Van Heerdin. Introduction by Desmond Morris. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21428-3, 64pp, hardcover, £6.99. (Poetry collection by a leading sf author, first edition.) 22nd October 1992

Anthony, Piers. *Phaze Doubt*. Hodder/NEL. ISBN 0 450-56246-8, 303pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; the seventh and last book in the "Apprentice Adept" series.) 5th November 1992

Asimov, Isaac, and Robert Silverberg. *Child of Time*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32270-2, 342pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; it's based in part on Asimov's story "The Ugly Little Boy" [1958].) 27th November 1992

Asimov, Isaac, and Robert Silverberg. *Nightfall*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32096-3, 352pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; it's based in part on Asimov's story "Nightfall" [1941] reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 31.) 27th November 1992

Asimov, Isaac, and Robert Silverberg. *The Positronic Man*. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04700-3, 223pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; it's based on Asimov's story "The Bicentennial Man" [1976].) 12th November 1992

Asprin, Robert. *The Myth-ing Omnibus*. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-914991-5, 200+217+202pp, paperback, £8.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Another Fine Myth* [1978], *Myth Conceptions* [1980] and *Myth Directions* [1982], the cover price seems exorbitant for an A-format paperback, however fat.) 1st October 1992

Asprin, Robert. *The Second Myth-ing Omnibus*. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-921471-7, 170+172+167pp, paperback, £8.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Hit or Myth* [1983], *Myth-ing Persons* [1984] and *Little Myth Marker* [1985], they've left the hyphen out of "Myth-ing" on the title page of this one, but it's there on the cover.) 1st October 1992

Atwood, Margaret. *Wilderness Tips*. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-395-8, 247pp, paperback, £5.99. (Collection, first published in Canada [?], 1991; some of these ten stories verge on fantasy and horror; see the interview with Atwood in *Interzone* 65.) 22nd October 1992

Aycliffe, Jonathan. *Naomi's Room*. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21436-4, 207pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 36. "Jonathan Aycliffe" is a pseudonym of Denis MacEoin who also writes thrillers as "Daniel Easterman" [see below].) 19th November 1992

Aycliffe, Jonathan. *Whispers in the Dark*. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13927-7, 221pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 19th November 1992

Ballard, J.G. *Vermilion Sands*. Orion Phoenix, ISBN 1-85799-005-6, 208pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1971; this is a reprint of the Dent edition of 1985 [Dent having been taken over by the new company, Orion], which followed the revised contents of the Jonathan Cape edition of 1973, with author's preface dating from that year, the cover art is taken from a René Magritte painting of 1936 entitled "La Méditation.") October 1992

Ballard, J.G. *The Voices of Time*. Orion Phoenix, ISBN 1-85799-000-5, 197pp.

UK Books Received

October 1992

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published as *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare* in 1963; this is a reprint of the re-titled Dent edition of 1984, which followed the revised contents of the Gollancz edition of 1974; eight classic stories, still among the best of ever written; the cover art is taken from a late Salvador Dali painting entitled "Hallucinogenic Toreador.") 10th November 1992.

Barker, Clive. **The Thief of Always: A Fable**. Illustrated by the author. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224144-7, viii+230pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Juvenile [?] horror/fantasy novella, first edition; although the generous pagination may make it appear longer, this is a very short novel, copiously illustrated by Barker in a lively, slightly childish style.) 12th November 1992.

Bear, Greg. **Songs of Earth and Power**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-5494-1, 693pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition [?]; it contains Bear's two full-length ventures into the fantasy mode, *The Infinity Concerto* [1984] and *The Serpent Muge* [1986], plus a new afterword by the author.) 12th November 1992.

Bradbury, Ray. **Green Shadows, White Whale**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224105-6, 266pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Non-sf novel by a well-known sf/fantasy writer; this is based on Bradbury's experiences in Ireland in the 1950s, when he worked on the screenplay of John Huston's film *Moby Dick*; it incorporates some of his "Irish" short stories of the 1960s and later, such as "The Beggar on O'Connell Bridge" and "The Anthem Sprinters.") 10th November 1992.

Byatt, A.S. **Angels and Insects**. Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-3717-7, 292pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy [?] collection, first edition; this pair of novellas by a recent winner of the Booker Prize for Fiction does seem to fall into our purview: the blurb describes the first tale as "a lively Gothic fable of the Earthly Paradise," and the second as "a philosophical ghost story.") 19th October 1992.

Campbell, Ramsey. **The Count of Eleven**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0088-7, 374pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991.) 12th November 1992.

Campbell, Ramsey, ed. **Uncanny Banquet**. "Great tales of the supernatural." Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-90311-6, 338pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains comparatively little-known tales by such masters of the form as Robert Aickman, Walter de la Mare, Russell Kirk, Fritz Leiber and Donald Wandrei, plus, in its entirety, the rare 1914 novel *The Hole of the Pit* by Adrian Ross.) 12th November 1992.

Carey, Diane. **Best Destiny**. "Star Trek." Simon & Schuster/Pocket, ISBN 0-671-79587-2, xiv+398pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this is the American edition with a UK price sticker.) 23rd October 1992.

Carter, Angela, ed. **The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales**. Illustrated by Corinna Sargood. Introduction by Marina Warner. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-491-1, xvii+233pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy/folklore anthology, first edition; it was compiled by Carter before her untimely death in February 1992, but alas she didn't live to write the introduction.) 19th October 1992.

Chadwick, Philip George. **The Death Guard**. Introduction by Brian W. Aldiss. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14017060-X, 394pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1939; this is the first ever reprint of a "lost" future-war novel by an obscure British author [1893-1955] who lived in Brighton.) 29th October 1992.

Charrette, Robert N. **Wolf Pack**. "Battle-tech." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017547-4, 442pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this is volume four in the series, the first three of which were written by Robert Thurston.) 10th November 1992.

Clarke, Arthur C., and Gentry Lee. **The Garden of Rama**. Orbit, ISBN 1-857723-020-5, 398pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; third in the "Rama" sequence.) 22nd October 1992.

Cooper, Fiona. **The Empress of the Seven Oceans**. Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99490-1, 381pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it seems to be an adventure story about 18th-century lesbian pirates – a female version of some of William S. Burroughs's homosexual fantasies?) 12th November 1992.

Dahl, Roald. **The Collected Short Stories**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015807-3, 762pp, paperback, £8.99. (Collection of weird and macabre tales, first published in 1991; it incorporates the complete contents of the earlier volumes entitled *Kiss, Kiss*, *Over to You*, *Switch Bitch*, *Someone Like You* and *Eight Further Tales of the Unexpected*.) No date shown: October 1992.

David, Peter. **Imzadi**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Simon & Schuster/Pocket, ISBN 0-671-79197-4, 342pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this is the American edition with a UK price sticker.) 23rd November 1992.

Davison, Al. **The Minotaur's Tale**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05283-X, unpaginated, trade paperback, £9.99. (Graphic novel with horror elements; first edition.) 12th November 1992.

Disch, Thomas M. **The Prisoner: I am Not a Number!** Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-791-8, 248pp, paperback, £3.99. (Novelization of the 1960s thriller/fantasy television series; first published in the USA, 1970.) November 1992.

Donaldson, Stephen. **The Gap Into Vision: Forbidden Knowledge**. Fontana, ISBN 0-00-647020-3, 570pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; second in the "Gap" series; reviewed by Brian Stableford in Interzone 57.) 5th November 1992.

Douglas, Adam. **The Beast Within**. "A History of the Werewolf." Chapman, ISBN 1-85592-574-5, 294pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Study of lycanthropy in history and literature, first edition; as well as a considerable amount of scholarship on the topic, this book contains much mention of popular fiction and film, ranging from G.W.M. Reynolds's *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* [1857] to *An American Werewolf in London* [1979]; a solid work, recommended.) 23rd October 1992.

Easterman, Daniel. **Name of the Beast**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-248-13704-5, 476pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-future thriller, first edition; "Daniel Easterman" is a pseudonym of Denis MacEoin who also writes accomplished ghost stories as "Jonathan Aycliffe" [see above]; this one is about millennial upheavals in Egypt and the Middle East in 1999.) 19th November 1992.

Findley, Nigel. **Z X S**. "Shadowrun." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017557-1, 324pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this is volume four in the series, the first three of which were written by Robert N. Charrette.) 10th November 1992.

Fowler, Karen Joy. **Sarah Canary**. Hodder/Sceptre, ISBN 0-340-57462-3, 290pp,

paperback, £5.99. (Historical/"magic realist" novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by John Clute in Interzone 54; a pre-publication extract appeared in IZ 42.) 5th November 1992.

Gardner, Craig Shaw. **Scheherazade's Night Out**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3878-2, 344pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1992; third in the "Further Arabian Nights" trilogy; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in Interzone 65.) 19th November 1992.

Germain, Sylvie. **The Book of Nights**. Translated by Christine Donougher. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-00-3, 278pp, paperback, £8.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in France as *Le Livre des nuits*, 1985; the publishers describe this as "a masterpiece... [by] an author to rank with Borges, Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez as one of the great writers of magic realism.") 12th November 1992.

Gilluly, Sheila. **The Giant of Inishkerry: The Second Book of the Painter**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3868-5, 275pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in Interzone 62.) 19th November 1992.

Green, Simon R. **Mistworld**. Gollancz/VGCSF, ISBN 0-575-05372-0, 253pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 12th November 1992.

Gygax, Gary. **The Anubis Murders**. "Gary Gygax's Dangerous Journeys." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017558-X, 299pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this is volume one of a new series based on a game devised by Gygax; volumes two and three will be called *The Somarkand Solution* and *Death in Delhi*.) October 1992.

Hand, Elizabeth. **Aestival Tide**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40350-8, 399pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by John Clute in Interzone 64.) 12th November 1992.

Harrison, M. John. **The Course of the Heart**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-03891-8, 216pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a gritty work which the publishers describe as "weaving together mythology, Gnosticism and the troubled past and present of Eastern Europe.") Late entry: 11th July 1992 publication, received in October.

Herbert, James. **Portent**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-50910-4, 384pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; described by the publishers as "James Herbert's greatest novel to date," this book is set in the future and seems to be a *Revolt-of-Gaia* story.) 5th November 1992.

Jefferies, Mike. **Hidden Echoes**. Illustrated by the author. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21679-0, 336pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 22nd October 1992.

Jefferies, Mike. **Shadows in the Watchgate**. Illustrated by the author. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21719-3, 368pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; third in the "Heirs to Gnarlsmyre" series; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in Interzone 58.) 22nd October 1992.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **James Herbert: By Horror Haunted**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-53810-9, 320pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Essay/interview anthology, first edition; it contains articles on Britain's bestselling horror author, and conversations with him, by Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell, Neil Gaiman, Stephen Gallagher, Stephen King, Stephen Laws, Graham Masterton and Douglas E. Winter, among others; it's profusely illustrated, and makes a handsome Festschrift.) 5th November 1992.

Joyce, Graham. **Dark Sister**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0629-5, 279pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition; Joyce's second novel; his first, *Dreamside*, was praised in these pages by John Clute.) 12th November 1992.

Kaye, Marvin, with Saralee Kaye, eds. **Masterpieces of Terror and the Supernatural: A Treasury of Spellbinding Tales Old & New**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0030-5, xiii+658pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1985; it contains stories by Leonid Andreyev, Stephen Crane, Guy de Maupassant, J.W. Goethe, Jack London, Ogden Nash, Damon Runyon, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Robert Louis Stevenson, Lord Tennyson, Dylan Thomas, Ivan Turgenev, Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams and others, including most of the genre's standard authors from Poe to Bloch, plus brief but interesting introduction, afterword and notes by Kaye.) 22nd October 1992.

Kennealy, Patricia. **The Hawk's Grey Feather: A Book of The Keltiad**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21249-3, 464pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; it's the first volume of a new cycle which precedes the events of her original "Keltiad" trilogy, *The Silver Branch*, *The Copper Crown* and *The Throne of Scone*.) 5th November 1992.

Kenworthy, Chris, ed. **The Sun Rises Red**. "The new movement in contemporary writing." Barrington Books [Barth Hall, Liverpool Rd, Hulton, Preston, Lancs. PR4 5HB], ISBN 1-897729-00-6, 117pp, paperback, £3.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains all-new stories by Joel Lane, M. John Harrison & Simon Ings, Mike O'Driscoll, Nicholas Royle and others; a second anthology in this nicely-produced small-press series is promised for six months hence.) October 1992.

Kies, Cosey. **Presenting Young Adult Horror Fiction**. "Twayne's United States Authors Series." New York: Twayne, ISBN 0-8057-8217-6, x+203pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Guide to horror writers, first edition; in this context, "young adult" means simply "books that teenagers enjoy"; most of the authors covered are in fact adult fare: Virginia Andrews, Robert Bloch, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Anne Rice, John Saul, etc; there's even a chapter on "splatterpunk"; this is an interesting, well-informed book; recommended.) October 1992?

King, Stephen. **The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands**. Illustrated by Ned Dameron. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0050-X, 512pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 26th November 1992.

Kube-McDowell, Michael P. **Exile**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3949-5, 289pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 19th November 1992.

Laymon, Richard. **All Hallows Eve**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-39531-6, 200pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) 5th November 1992.

Laymon, Richard. **The Beast House**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-39353-4, 294pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 5th November 1992.

Laymon, Richard. **Beware**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-05803-4, 218pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) 5th November 1992.

Laymon, Richard. **Night Show**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-05706-2, 192pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) 5th November 1992.

Lumley, Brian. **Spawn of the Winds**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21466-6, 224pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1978.) 5th November 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Crystal Line**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02554-7, 271pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1992; third in the "Kilashandra" series.) 12th November 1992.

McDaniel, David. **The Prisoner: Who is Number 2?** Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-830-2, 168pp, paperback, £3.99. (Novelization of the 1960s thriller/fantasy television series; first published in the USA, 1970.) November 1992.

McDonald, Ian. **Kling Klang Klatch**. Illustrated by David Lyttleton. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05298-8, unpaginated, trade paperback, £9.99. (Sf graphic novel; first edition.) 12th November 1992.

Masterton, Graham. **Burial**. Heinemann, ISBN 0-434-45356-0, 508pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?].) 7th December 1992.

Masterton, Graham. **Prey**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0950-4, 352pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1992.) 7th December 1992.

Moorcock, Michael. **Corum**. "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 4." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-029-8, 393pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99; contains: *The Knight of the Swords* [1971], *The Queen of the Swords* [1971] and *The King of the Swords* [1972] plus a short preface by the author; these three novels have previously appeared in an omnibus edition entitled *The Swords of Corum*.) 5th November 1992.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Eternal Champion**. "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 2." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-025-5, 530pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99; contains: *The Eternal Champion* [1970], *Phoenix in Obsidian* [1973; originally published in the USA as *The Silver Warriors*] and *The Dragon in the Sword* [1987] plus a short preface by the author; as with the other three omnibus listed here, there seems to have been some textual revision, though the extent of this is not clear.) 5th November 1992.

Moorcock, Michael. **Hawkmoot**. "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 3." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-027-1, 533pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99; contains: *The Jewel in the Skull* [1967], *The Mad God's Amulet* [1968], *The Sword of the Dawn* [1968] and *The Runestaff* [1969] plus a short preface by the author; these four novels have previously appeared in an omnibus edition entitled *The History of the Runestaff*.) 5th November 1992.

Moorcock, Michael. **Von Bek**. "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 1." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-023-9, 504pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99; contains: *The Warhound and the World's Pain* [1981], *The City in the Autumn Stars* [1986] and "The Pleasure Garden of Felipe Sagittarius" [1965] plus a short preface by the author.) 5th November 1992.

Naylor, Grant. **Red Dwarf Omnibus**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-017466-4, 590pp, paperback, £7.99. (Humorous sf omnibus, first edition; it contains *Red Dwarf: Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers* [1989], *Better Than*

Life [1990] and some additional material, including the original pilot script for the "Red Dwarf" TV series; "Grant Naylor" is a pseudonym for Rob Grant and Doug Naylor.) 9th November 1992.

Pike, Christopher. **See You Later**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-55679-X, 189pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) October 1992?

Pratchett, Terry. **The Colour of Magic: The Graphic Novel**. Illustrated by Steven Ross; adapted by Scott Rockwell. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13945-9, unpaginated, trade paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy graphic novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 12th November 1992.

Rogers, Dave. **The Prisoner and Danger Man**. "Two books in one." Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-260-6, 254pp, trade paperback, £14.95. (Illustrated companion to the two cult television thriller series of the 1960s which starred Patrick McGoohan; first published in 1989; this is a re-release of the 1990 paperback.) November 1992.

Rogers, Dave. **Stingray**. Foreword by Gerry Anderson. Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-191-X, 96pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated companion to the juvenile television series of the 1960s; first edition.) 19th November 1992.

Royle, Nicholas, ed. **Darklands 2**. Egerton Press [5 Windsor Court, Avenue Rd, London N15 5QJ], ISBN 0-9518520-1-9, 207pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; a fatter collection than the first *Darklands*, it contains all-original stories by Julie Akhurst, John Burke, Pete Crowther, Graham Joyce, Garry Kilworth, Joel Lane, D.F. Lewis, Derek Marlowe, Mark Morris, Kim Newman, Michael Marshall Smith and others.) October 1992?

Simmons, Dan. **Prayers to Broken Stones: A Collection**. Introduction by Harlan Ellison. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3816-2, 469pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 64.) 19th November 1992.

Swithin, Antony. **The Winds of the Wastes: The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse, Book Three**. Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617854-5, 289pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 64.) 22nd October 1992.

Taylor, Roger. **Farnor: Part One of Nightfall**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0570-1, 378pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 12th November 1992.

Taylor-Stanley, Julia. **Mystica**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-1374-9, 346pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; a debut book by an author born in Glasgow in 1956, who has worked for some years as a songwriter and film composer.) 5th November 1992.

Wells, H.G. **Select Conversations with an Uncle (Now Extinct), with Two Hitherto Unprinted Conversations**. Edited by David C. Smith and Patrick Parrinder. Foreword by Michael Foot. University of North London Press, ISBN 185377-133-3, 90pp, paperback, £5.95. (Collection of popular-science sketches, first edition; a shorter version originally appeared in 1895.) October 1992.

Williams, Tad. **Tailchaser's Song**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-995940-2, 290pp, paperback, £4.99. (Animal-fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1985; the author's debut novel; it contains a £1 off voucher for the third volume of Williams' massive "Memory, Sorrow and Thorn" trilogy, *To Green Angel Tower*, which has now been announced for April 1993.) 5th November 1992.

Williams, Tad, and Nina Kiriki Hoffman. *Child of an Ancient City*. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-5499-2, 80pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novella, first published in the USA [?], 1992; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 12th November 1992.

Williams, Walter Jon. *Facets*. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21387-2, 321pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1990.) 22nd October 1992.

Willis, Connie. *Doomsday Book*. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-57986-7, 527pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 62.) 5th November 1992.

Wingrove, David. *Chung Kuo, Book Four: The Stone Within*. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-55283-7, xxi+425pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition.) 3rd December 1992.

Wolpert, Lewis. *The Unnatural Nature of Science*. Faber & Faber, ISBN 0-571-16490-0, xiv+191pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Popular science text, first edition; Wolpert, a biologist, is best known as the author of *The Triumph of the Embryo*; this new volume is an approach to the philosophy of science for the layman; as usual with such works, there is some passing mention of sf: e.g. Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* is cited on page 118, though Vonnegut doesn't appear in the index.) No date shown: October 1992.

Overseas Books Received

Anderson, Kevin J., and Doug Beason. *Assemblers of Infinity*. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29921-2, 356pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) February 1993.

Anthony, Piers. *Demons Don't Dream*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85389-0, 304pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 16th "Xanth" novel.) February 1993.

Brust, Steven, P.J.F. Agyar. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85178-2, 254pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; excuse our ignorance, but what do the initials "P.J.F." mean after the author's name — some obscure reference to Philip José Farmer?) March 1993.

Busby, F.M. *The Singularity Project*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85443-9, 349pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) February 1993.

Douglas, Carole Nelson. *Seed Upon the Wind: Book II of The Talisman*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85147-2, 319pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) December 1992.

Goldstein, Lisa. *The Red Magician*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85462-5, 192pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1982; proof copy received; Goldstein's

debut book, it won a National Book Award as best juvenile novel of its year, on its first appearance as a paperback original, and is now regarded as a modern classic of the genre; surprisingly, this is its first hardcover edition.) March 1993.

Milan, Victor. *Turn of the Cards: A Wild Cards Mosaic Novel*. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56152-9, 423pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; 12th in the "Wild Cards" series edited by George R.R. Martin.) February 1993.

Tarr, Judith. *Lord of the Two Lands*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85362-9, 351pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Historical fantasy [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's about Alexander the Great, and has one of those "Mary Renault-style" five-page afterwords which explains the book's background in history and Egyptian mythology.) March 1993.

Wilhelm, Kate. *Seven Kinds of Death*. "A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl mystery." St Martin's Press 0-312-08290-8, 249pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Crime novel by a well-known sf writer, first edition.) 16th October 1992.

Womack, Jack. *Elvissey*. "A novel of Elvis past and Elvis future." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85202-9, 311pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) January 1993.

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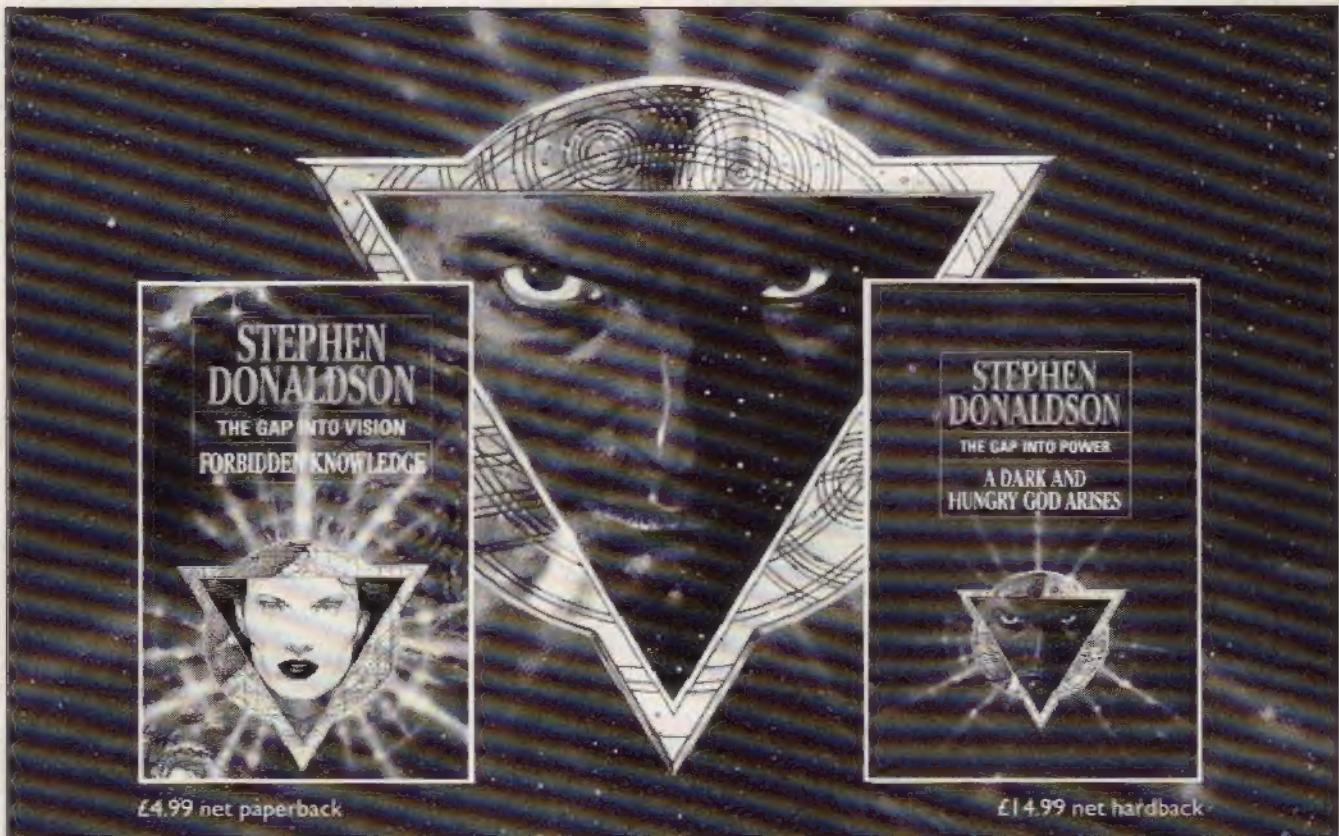
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